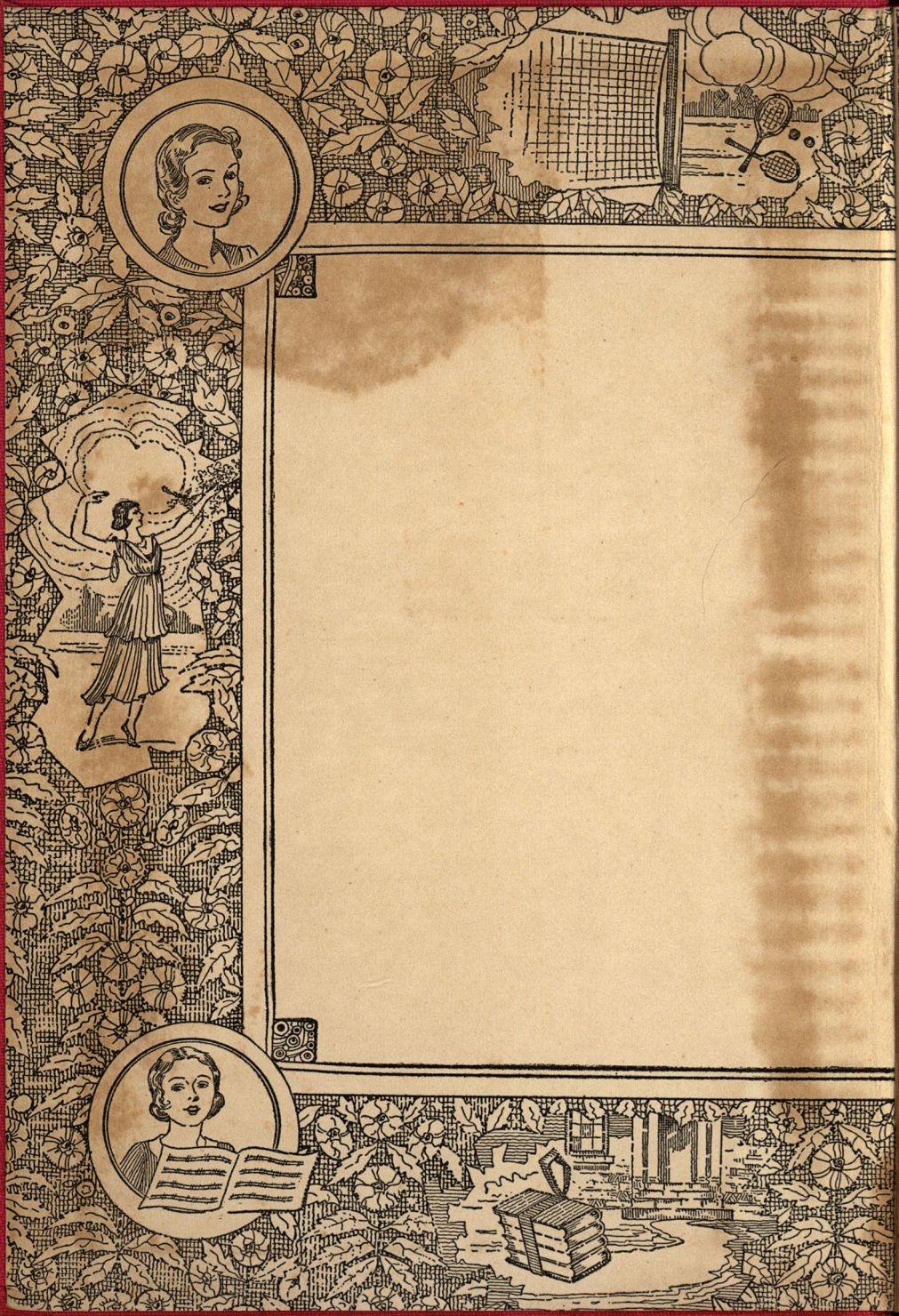
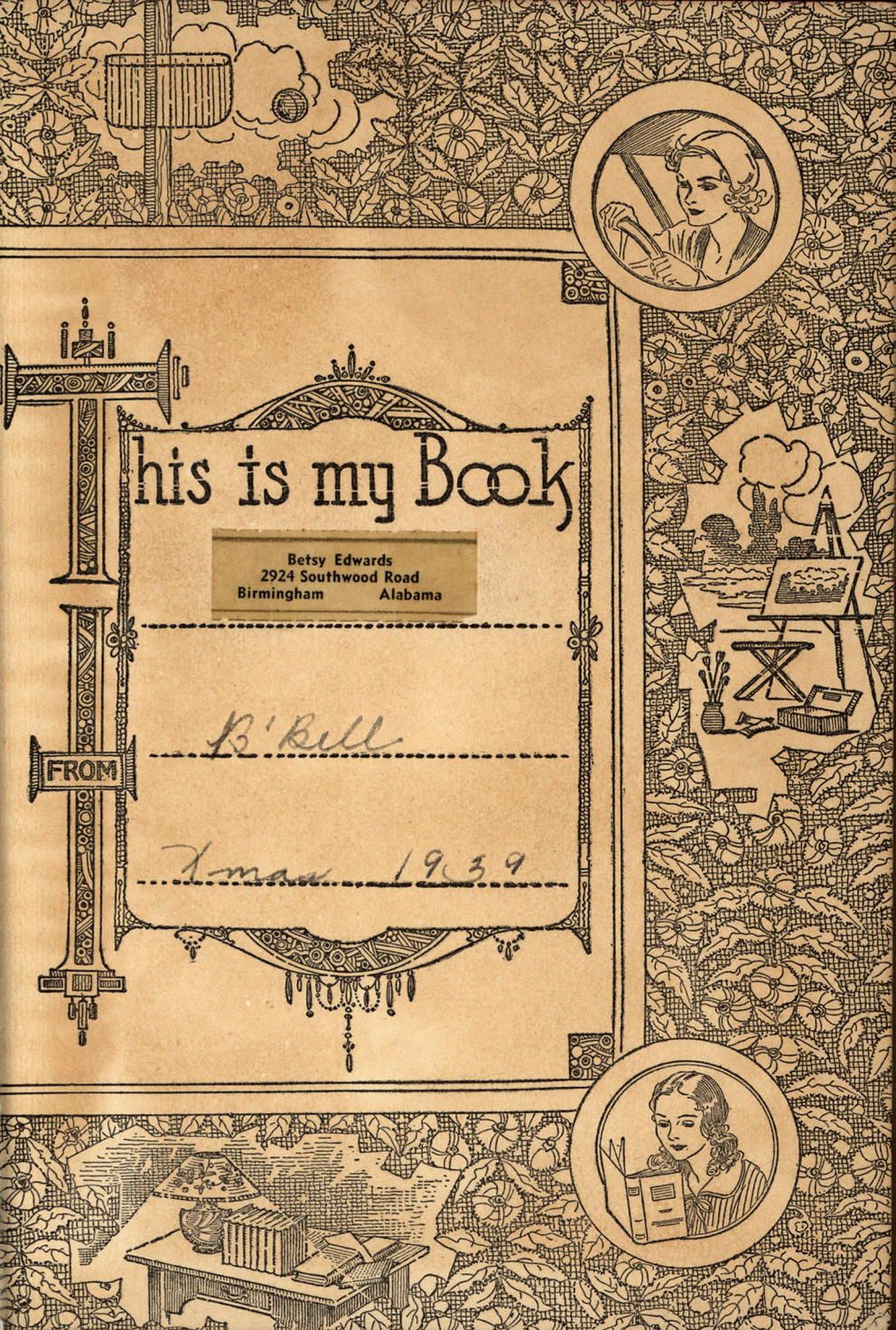
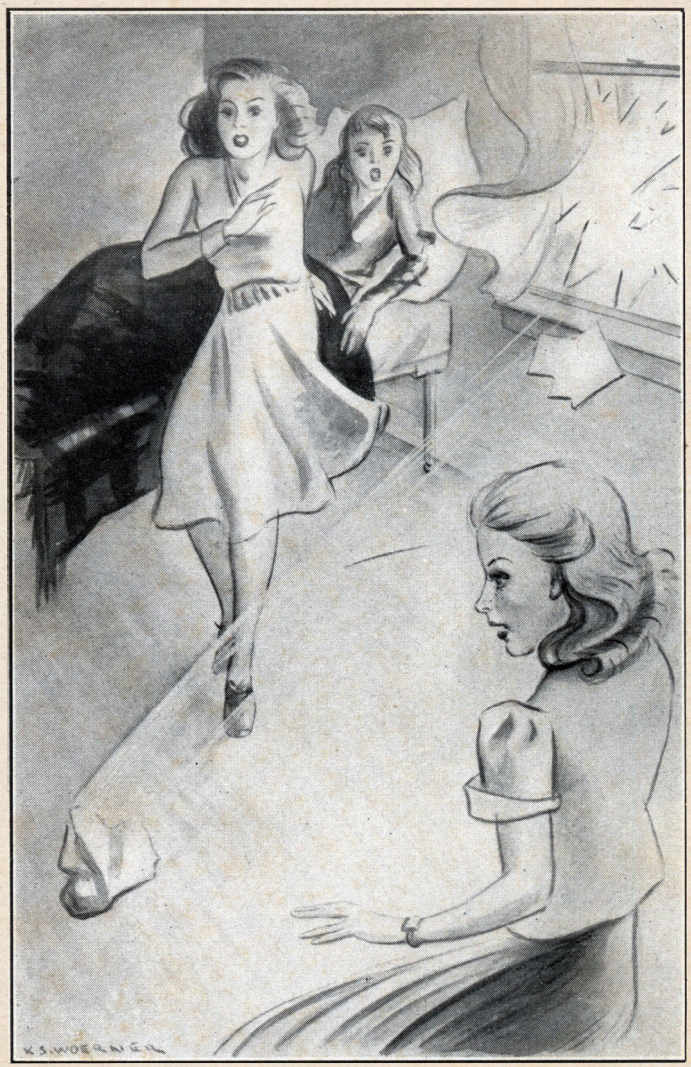
TALE of the WITCH DOLL

MILDRED A. WIRT




This is my Book
Betsy Edwards
2924 Southwood Road
Birmingham Alabama
FROM
B'Bill
Xmas 1939



"SOMEONE THREW A ROCK!" LOUISE GASPED.

"Tale of the Witch Doll" (See page 150)

Tale of the Witch Doll

By

MILDRED A. WIRT

Author of

MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

TRAILER STORIES FOR GIRLS

Illustrated

CUPPLES AND LEON COMPANY

Publishers

NEW YORK

PENNY PARKER

MYSTERY STORIES

Large 12 mo. *Cloth* *Illustrated*

TALE OF THE WITCH DOLL

THE VANISHING HOUSEBOAT

Other Titles in Preparation

COPYRIGHT, 1939, BY CUPPLES AND LEON CO.

Tale of the Witch Doll

PRINTED IN U. S. A.

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
1	TRAGEDY FOR NELLIE	*1*
2	THE SHOW GOES ON	*11*
3	A STRANGE GIFT	*19*
4	OUT OF THE PAST	*29*
5	MISS HARMON'S WITCH DANCE	*40*
6	THE DIAMOND NECKLACE	*47*
7	A SHADOW ON THE WINDOW	*54*
8	"BEWARE!"	*61*
9	THE GREAT OSANDRA	*73*
10	MISS HARMON'S LOSS	*80*
11	MORE OF THE WITCH DOLL	*89*
12	A VOICE IN THE DARK	*98*
13	THE MEDIUM'S CONFESSION	*104*
14	DISTURBING NEWS	*110*
15	A LURKING FIGURE	*118*
16	SUSPICION	*125*
17	PENNY'S DISCOVERY	*133*
18	AN ASTONISHING ADMISSION	*141*
19	A WARNING NOTE	*151*

CHAPTER		PAGE
20	THE SECRET PANEL	*160*
21	A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE	*167*
22	IDENTIFYING A SCOUNDREL	*173*
23	INSIDE THE DOLL SHOP	*180*
24	UNDER THE KITCHEN	*189*
25	A TRIUMPH FOR PENNY	*199*

CHAPTER

1

TRAGEDY FOR NELLIE

"JUST ONE more dive," pleaded Penny, climbing nimbly up the rungs of the bright brass ladder.

"Then make it snappy," commanded Louise Sidell, a dark-haired girl in a blue bathing suit. She sighed and sank down on the edge of the tiled swimming pool. "We have to dress and get out of here sometime, you know. I promised Mother I'd stop at the doll shop."

"Oh, we still have lots of time." Penny glanced carelessly at the big wall clock as she mounted the ladder to the diving board.

Raising her eyes to the slim figure above her, Louise felt a warm wave of admiration for her chum. Penelope Parker—Penny—to all her friends, had that indefinable thing called personality. Her deep blue eyes, golden ringlets, clear skin, gave one an impression of beauty; and besides, she had sparkle and vivacity. Louise reflected that nearly all the world's prize packages had been dropped on Penny's casual little shoulders.

"Well, what will it be this time?" she called. "Better make it good!"

Penny didn't answer. With an easy grace she moved out on the board and sprang lightly into the air. Tucking into a tight ball, she rolled swiftly forward, opened again into a straight line and entered the water with scarcely a ripple. She pushed up hard from the bottom of the pool. Her head and shoulders shot high above the water. Penny grinned, and too lazy to swim, lunged for the side of the tank.

"Were my toes pointed, nice and neat?"

"Your toes!" Louise exclaimed indignantly. "When you try that somersault dive you're just plain lucky your neck isn't broken. Come on, we're going home."

She seized her chum by the arms, dragging her bodily from the pool.

"I'll beat you dressing," challenged Penny, making a dash for the shower.

Long before Louise was ready, she had donned her white sports dress, red sandals, and busied herself untangling wet ringlets under the hot air drier. But at last both girls considered themselves presentable. They tossed their wet bathing suits into the laundry basket, and went out on the street.

"I promised Mother I'd buy a doll for a poor child," Louise remarked as they walked along. "I thought I'd

get it at Nellie Marble's shop. But you needn't go along unless you like."

"Oh, I have loads of time," said Penny. "Anyway, I'd rather enjoy talking with Nellie again. I haven't seen her since she graduated."

Both Penny and Louise were sophomores at Riverview High. Nellie Marble had attended the school for only two years, and the girls had never known her well.

"Mother says Nellie has had a hard time of it until lately," Louise commented.

"She had courage, going into business for herself."

"Yes, her doll shop is paying well now, I guess. But she had a long struggle building up her trade. She deserves to succeed. She makes the cutest dolls in town."

The Marble Doll Shoppe was located at the very outskirts of Riverview, not far from the Big Bear River. After a long walk, the girls came to a district where the business houses were run down and in need of paint. A swinging sign drew their attention to the Doll Shoppe, a clean, white building, which stood in sharp contrast to its neighbors.

Louise opened the door. A musical bell jingled pleasantly as they went inside.

"Why, look at this!" Penny cried, stopping short.

Instead of the neat, tidily arranged show rooms which they had expected to find, everything was in disorder. Dolls were lying helter-skelter on the floor, many with their heads crushed. A glass counter had been broken.

While the girls were staring, they heard footsteps. Nellie Marble, a thin, tired-looking girl of twenty-two, came to the doorway from the workroom at the rear of the shop. Her eyes were red from weeping.

"Oh," she said in a listless voice. "I thought it might be the police."

"The police?" echoed Penny. "Why, Nellie, what happened here?"

"You may see for yourselves." Nellie's gaze swept the disordered room. "The place was like this when I unlocked this morning. Some vandal broke in and smashed my most expensive China dolls."

"Why, I never heard of such a mean trick!" exclaimed Louise.

"You notified the police, Nellie?"

"Yes, I telephoned right away. They instructed me to leave everything as it was and they'd send a man out to look the place over. So far no one has come. I suppose the police figure a few broken dolls aren't of great importance."

Nellie spoke with deep bitterness. Sinking down in a chair she began to cry.

"I know just how you feel," said Penny, slipping an arm about the girl's shoulders. "I'd rage like a jungle lion if anyone did such a thing to me. Do you have any idea who broke in?"

"Not the slightest. I locked up last night the same as usual. Both the rear and front doors were still fastened this morning."

"Did you examine the windows?"

"They were all locked except one at the back of the building. It has a broken catch."

"Perhaps the intruder entered the shop that way."

"It's possible," Nellie admitted, "but the sill was still dusty this morning."

She arose, and moving over to the counter, selected a large doll which had been costumed as a Dutch girl. Its fragile head had been crushed.

"See this! An imported doll too. I shall never be able to replace the head for the importer has gone out of business. This doll was worth twenty dollars."

"How high do you figure your loss?" Penny asked.

"Over a hundred dollars. Oh, I'm so discouraged I feel like giving up my shop."

"Don't talk such nonsense," Penny chided. "Of course you'll clean up this mess and go on the same as before. This is just a little set-back."

"I'm not sure," Nellie said slowly. "Somehow, I feel unlucky, as if this were just the beginning."

"The beginning of what, Nellie?"

"I don't know—something sinister and—well, I can't explain. It's just a feeling."

"That's exactly what it is," said Louise. "Just a feeling, Nellie. You're allowing yourself to get morbid."

"Perhaps. But I've worked twelve hours a day to make this little shop a success. And now all my hopes are shattered."

"Why take such a serious outlook?" Louise asked. "You surely don't expect a thing like this to happen again."

"It could very easily. I have a feeling—"

"Oh, you're positively depressed," Louise cut in lightly. "I imagine all this damage was done by a group of hoodlums. The police may be able to trace the persons and make them pay."

"Nellie," said Penny in a quiet voice, "has anyone approached you? I mean, have you been asked to pay money for protection?"

Nellie shook her head.

"No, this all came like a bolt from the blue. My business has been especially good lately. In fact, just two days ago I had a chance to sell out. I almost wish I had taken it."

"Was the offer a good one?" inquired Penny.

"Yes, fairly tempting. This old lady—Mrs. Farmer

—said she would pay me a thousand dollars for my stock of dolls. That would be a very fair price."

"Did you decide to take it?"

"Well, no, I figured I could make more by keeping on here. I've built up a large number of customers and I do love to make dolls."

"If you feel that way, I'd not sell to anyone," declared Penny. "Within a few months time this shop should be worth far more than a thousand dollars."

"Yes, if vandals don't break in again."

Nellie continued to look unhappy. Her hands fluttered nervously as she reached to put away the broken Dutch doll.

"I do wish the police would hurry," she said.

The door bell jingled and the three girls turned to see who had entered. An old woman with a dark cape over her hunched shoulders, her misshapen felt hat pulled low over a wrinkled face, came softly into the room.

"There is Mrs. Farmer now," Nellie whispered by way of information.

The old woman glanced sharply at the girls and then her gaze roved about the shop room.

"Dear me, dear me," she said in a purring voice. "What have we here?" She stooped painfully and picked up one of the smashed dolls, cuddling it as if

it were human. "The poor little thing. Who crushed its pretty head?"

"I wish I knew, Mrs. Farmer," replied Nellie. "Someone broke in here last night and wrecked the place."

"Tish! Tish! You don't say! Such a vicious thing to do. I am so sorry for you, my child."

"I imagine you must feel a bit relieved that I didn't sell the shop to you," commented Nellie.

A cunning look came into the eyes of old Mrs. Farmer, or so it seemed to Penny. The expression changed in a twinkling.

"No, my child, it would take many broken dolls to frighten an old woman like me. That was why I dropped in again. I have been thinking, if you sell your shop to me, I might find a place for you as my assistant. A thousand dollars is a large sum of money, my child, and there would be a small weekly salary as well. That would appeal to you perhaps?"

"I don't know, Mrs. Farmer. I must take time to think it over."

"Yes, yes, to be sure," the old lady nodded. "Of course you would wish to think it over. But do not take too long. Not too long, my child. So many things could happen."

"I'll try to decide within the next few days," Nellie promised.

The old lady bowed to each girl in turn, and murmuring a few sympathetic words about the broken dolls, retreated out the door.

"What did you think of her?" asked Nellie when Mrs. Farmer could be seen crossing the street.

"She struck me as a rather silly, simple-minded old lady," declared Louise.

"Her offer seemed fair enough," said Penny slowly. "But she was so pleasant that she was unpleasant, if you know what I mean."

"I do," said Nellie. "She always gives me a very uncomfortable feeling. That's one reason why I've not wished to sell out to her. I'd not care to work as her assistant, and I'm sure she'd never make a success of the place."

"If I were you, I'd be cautious in my dealings," warned Penny. "I have a sneaking suspicion, Mrs. Farmer may not be as simple-minded as she would have one believe."

It was well past the luncheon hour, so the girls quickly selected a Parisian doll from Nellie's undamaged stock.

"I'll give this doll to you," the girl declared.

"Indeed, you'll do no such thing!" Louise protested vigorously. She forced a bill into Nellie's hand.

Promising that they would try to drop around the following day, Louise and Penny left the Shoppe with

their purchase. Directly across the street they observed Mrs. Farmer. The woman had paused and was peering into the display window of a grocery store.

"There's something strange about that old lady," Penny said in an undertone. "Did you notice her eyes, Louise?"

"She wore glasses, didn't she?"

"I don't mean that. Her eyes had such a wicked, evil expression. I wish Nellie had never met her."

"Mrs. Farmer seemed just like a rather silly old lady to me."

"And what was it she said?" Penny went on musingly. " 'Don't take too long to think it over. *So many things could happen.*' "

"Oh, you're giving her words a special interpretation of your own," laughed Louise. "Come along! I was due home an hour ago."

Taking Penny firmly by the arm, she pulled her on down the narrow street.

CHAPTER

2

THE SHOW GOES ON

"IF YOU'RE in such a frightful rush, I might summon up my pumpkin coach and drive you home in style," Penny laughed. "Would you like that, Lou?"

"I'd be grateful for anything on four wheels," sighed Louise. "I do wish we had brought your car now."

Penny's "car," variously known to the girls as the "leaping tiger, the bus, the junk wagon," had been purchased second hand with money faithfully earned by doing sundry unpleasant tasks about the Parker home. In outward appearance, the shiny blue coupe looked very nearly like a new model, but it had a disconcerting way of breaking down at inconvenient intervals. Penny's father, Anthony Parker, editor of the Riverside Star, had spoken pearls of wisdom when he declared that the car would teach his daughter bitter lessons in finance and mechanics.

"It happens that as usual my taxi is in Simpson's Garage," explained Penny. "But the place is just

around the corner. Joe promised he'd have it fixed by twelve today."

The girls reached the end of the block and turned in at the garage. A man in greasy coveralls assured Penny that her automobile was ready to be driven away.

"How much will it be this time, Joe?"

"Oh, make it two dollars," he answered carelessly. "I'll give you a special price because you're such a steady customer."

Penny laughed and paid the bill. She slid behind the steering wheel, and with Louise beside her, backed out on the street. The motor had a smooth sound.

"We'll try Clinton Boulevard," Penny decided. "That's the quickest route to your home."

The car rolled down the wide, shady street. Penny kept the arrow of the speedometer steady at thirty miles an hour. A large black automobile whizzed past so close that the girls could imagine they heard the fenders scrape.

"Look at that fellow go!" exclaimed Louise indignantly. "Doing sixty easily. He missed us by inches."

"I wish the speed cop would get him. Drivers like him are a menace."

The girls could see the big car flashing on down the road. Whenever another vehicle loomed up, the driver loudly sounded his horn. Suddenly Louise gave a frightened cry.

"Oh, I knew it! I knew it!"

In trying to pass, the black car had sideswiped a large gray limousine. To the horror of the girls, the gray automobile swerved into a deep ditch, turning sideways at a sharp angle.

Penny saw the black car slacken pace momentarily. The driver, a man, peered backward toward the damaged automobile. But he did not halt.

"Get his license number, Lou!" Penny cried.

"Three—eight—six. Oh, I lost the other two numbers."

"And so did I. No use chasing him either. This old car wouldn't overtake a snail."

Pulling up near the gray limousine, the girls sprang from their car and ran to see if anyone had been seriously hurt. A uniformed chauffeur had managed to get the rear door open, and was helping a young woman. The angle of the tilted car floor was so steep that she could not climb out by her own efforts.

"Are you injured, Miss Harmon?" the man asked anxiously.

"I—I think I am all right, James," the young woman murmured. "Just badly shaken."

Penny held the car door open, and the chauffeur lifted Miss Harmon to the ground. She leaned weakly against him for a moment.

"What happened?" she asked in a dazed voice. "The first thing I knew we were in the ditch."

"That road hog in the black car struck us!" said the chauffeur angrily. "And he was too cowardly to stop."

"The first three numbers of his auto license were 386," Louise declared. "The police may be able to trace him."

For the first time the young woman became aware of the girls.

"Did you see the accident?" she inquired.

"Yes, we did," replied Penny. "The man very nearly struck our own car. He was taking all of the road."

"I wish you would give me your names," said the young woman. "If the man should be traced I may need you as witnesses."

While Penny and Louise were writing down their addresses on a card, the chauffeur inspected the limousine.

"The car doesn't appear damaged, except for the fender," he said. "We rolled into the ditch pretty easy."

Miss Harmon glanced at her wristwatch, a tiny gold oval set with large diamonds. She was a beautiful woman. Her clothes were expensive, but Penny thought them a little extreme.

"It is after one thirty now, James," she declared anxiously. "We have only twenty-five minutes to reach the theatre. Can you make it?"

"I'll do my best, Miss Harmon."

The chauffeur climbed into the front seat of the limousine. He was able to start the motor but when he shifted gears, there was no movement, only a loud, grinding roar.

"I can't drive it out, Miss Harmon," he said. "We're in at too steep an angle. I'll have to go for a garage-man."

"Oh, dear, then we'll never reach the theatre in time! And I *must* be there!" Miss Harmon turned quickly toward Penny. "Do you know of a taxi stand near here?"

"Not on Clinton Boulevard," returned Penny. "But if you wish, I'll be glad to take you to the theatre in my car."

"Oh, my dear, you've saved my life!" Miss Harmon exclaimed. "I'm due to go on at the Rialto at two o'clock, and it would ruin me to be late."

"Are you an actress?" Louise asked in awe.

"Yes, I have played various roles, but at present I am in a dancing act. Surely you have heard my name, Helene Harmon?"

"Of course," said Penny, giving Louise a sharp dig in the ribs. "The Rialto ran a half page advertisement in Dad's paper yesterday."

"I am the headliner at the Rialto," Miss Harmon declared in a pleased tone. She glanced again at her

watch, reminding the girls: "We have just twenty minutes."

"We'll get you there in time unless the car breaks down."

Miss Harmon laughed pleasantly, never guessing that Penny's remark had been meant in seriousness. She took a little suitcase make-up kit from the limousine and followed the girls to the blue coupe.

"Everything has gone wrong since I struck this town three days ago," she sighed as they drove along. "First I lost Marie, my French maid, who has been with me for years. That upset me, for the new girl is very indifferent. And now this accident."

"You were fortunate to escape without serious injury," Louise ventured.

"Yes, I might have been horribly crippled or scarred. Then my career as a dancer would end. The thought frightens me."

With a shiver, the young woman leaned her head back against the cushion. Her face was pale.

"Are you feeling all right, Miss Harmon?" Louise asked. "Perhaps we should take you to a doctor instead of the theatre."

"Perish the thought, my dear. The show must go on, you know. My nerves are a bit shattered now, but I am an old trouper. I'll pull myself together when I reach the theatre."

Closing her eyes, Miss Harmon appeared to relax. She said no more, and Penny concentrated her full attention upon the road. Soon they were threading through the dense city traffic with the minutes ticking rapidly away.

"Only ten left," Louise warned as they passed a large clock in a jewelry store window.

Miss Harmon straightened up, glanced at her own watch and opened her make-up box. With deft strokes she began to apply grease paint, carmen lip stick and eyelash darkener. Louise watched in fascination.

"I look grotesque now," the dancer smiled, "but under the lights these colors will tone down. Having my make-up on will save me five minutes."

A truck loomed up ahead, and Penny's face grew tense. She could not get around, and the driver paid no heed to the polite "toot" of the coupe's horn.

"We'll never make it," Miss Harmon said nervously. "I'm due to go on exactly at two and it will take me five minutes to get into my dancing costume."

"I'll get you there," Penny said grimly.

She backed the car around, turning into a narrow alley.

"This isn't Riverview's most scenic route, but it will take us to the stage door."

A moment later the car pulled up at the rear en-

trance of the Rialto Theatre. Miss Harmon quickly alighted.

"Please don't go away until you have seen the show," she said hurriedly. "Park your car and come inside. I wish to talk with you later."

Thrusting two pieces of pasteboard into Louise's hand, the young woman disappeared through the stage door.

CHAPTER

3

A STRANGE GIFT

"WHAT DID Miss Harmon give you, Louise?" asked Penny.

"Door passes." Louise stared down at the pieces of pink cardboard. "Let's go inside. I think it would be fun to see a show from back-stage."

"So do I. But weren't you in a hurry to get home?"

"I'm so late another half hour won't make much difference now. One doesn't get a chance like this every day."

"Right you are," agreed Penny. "I'll park the car."

After the automobile had been jammed close against the theatre building, the girls presented themselves at the side door. Just inside sat an old man, his chair tilted comfortably against the wall.

Louise timidly offered him the passes. Without glancing at them, he inclined his head.

"Go right along in," he said between puffs on his long-stemmed pipe. "Miss Harmon's act is on now.

You kin watch her from the wings if you've a mind to. But don't make any noise."

He jerked his thumb toward a narrow, wooden stairway. Penny and Louise tiptoed up the steps. They could hear the stir of the audience, and the first strains of the orchestra. They crept into the right wing, close beside an electrician who was busy flooding the stage with rainbow-hued lights.

A lithe, supple figure in white, with huge red wings, pirouetted about the stage in a butterfly dance. The two girls watched the whirling dancer in awe.

"She's marvelous," whispered Louise.

The dance came to an end, and amid thunderous applause, Miss Harmon darted into the left wing where her maid stood waiting. In a twinkling she had divested herself of the butterfly wings. Beneath the white costume she wore one of gleaming gold. The maid handed her a cane, a high silk hat, and helped her substitute a pair of tap shoes for her ballet slippers.

"She's faster than a Fireman answering a 'three alarm,' " Penny observed admiringly. "But that new maid is awkward."

Louise nodded, for she too had noticed that Miss Harmon's assistant was slow and fumbling in her movements. They saw the dancer frown in annoyance. However, before the applause had died away, she was

back on the stage again, this time with a fast acrobatic tap dance.

Penny watched her for a few minutes, and then her gaze wandered to Miss Harmon's maid. The woman might have been thirty years of age. She had large hands and a plain face, but it was the expression of the dark eyes which held the girl's attention. Unaware that she was under scrutiny, the maid regarded her dancing mistress with a look of undisguised hatred.

"Louise—" Penny whispered, nudging her chum.

Before she could add more, the maid's eyes focused upon the two girls. Penny, feeling as if her very thoughts had been read, quickly looked back toward the stage.

The tap dance ended in a whirlwind series of cartwheels and handsprings. After three bows, Miss Harmon ran off the stage for the last time, tossed her hat and cane into the hands of the maid, and then sought Louise and Penny.

"I'm so glad you saw my act," she smiled, guiding them toward the stairway. "Did you like my dancing?"

"It was wonderful," declared Louise.

"You must have been born without starch in your bones," Penny added. "I don't see how you do all those bending stunts."

"I started practicing when I was four years old. My mother was a dancer. I've been on the stage all my life."

Miss Harmon opened the door of her dressing room. Penny and Louise hesitated, scarcely knowing whether or not they were expected to enter.

"Please stay and chat with me while I take off this grease paint," Miss Harmon invited cordially. "Come right in."

The dressing room chairs were littered with articles of clothing. Miss Harmon swept them clean and motioned for the girls to seat themselves.

"This room is a mess. My new maid, Felice, is so shiftless. And I wonder what is keeping her now?"

Miss Harmon frowned with irritation as she picked up a rough towel and began to apply cold cream to her face.

"Tell me all about yourselves," she urged.

"There's just nothing to tell," said Penny modestly. "You already know our names."

"Do you have any sisters or brothers?"

"Louise has a younger brother, Ted. I'm not lucky enough to have any. You see, there's just Dad and me in our family."

"Oh, your mother is dead?" Miss Harmon inquired with quick sympathy.

"Yes," Penny nodded, "Mrs. Weems, our housekeeper, has looked after me ever since I can remember. She's a dear."

"Penny's father owns the *Riverside Star*," Louise declared with pride. "The only real newspaper in the city."

"Dad thinks so anyway," laughed Penny.

Miss Harmon regarded the girl with a new and somewhat shrewd interest. "So your father is a newspaper owner? Well, perhaps you could get him to run a favorable line about my act."

"I might," Penny said cautiously.

"No, I was only joking," the dancer answered with a quick change of mood. "Favorable publicity helps, of course, but you have done me enough favors for one day."

Before Penny could reply, the dressing room door opened, and the maid, Felice, came in. She glanced at the girls with an expression which easily might have been interpreted as hostile.

"Felice," said Miss Harmon impatiently, "how many times must I tell you that I expect you to come to the dressing room immediately after my act?"

"I stopped to get this package from the doorman," the maid muttered.

"Oh, flowers!" Miss Harmon exclaimed, her face

brightening. "From some unknown admirer, I suppose."

She eagerly accepted the package, and breaking the stout cord, raised the box lid. A strange expression came over her face as she stared at the contents.

"Why, what is this?" she gasped.

She lifted from its tissue paper wrapping, a queer doll with a pointed black hat, a long flowing dark cape, and a horrible, grotesque face.

"Someone has sent me an old witch!" Miss Harmon exclaimed, holding it up for the others to see. "A doll made like a witch! Such a weird looking thing!"

"It's bad luck to get a doll like that, Miss Harmon," declared the maid.

"Oh, you're always saying everything is bad luck," protested the dancer. "I wonder who could have sent this doll? It must have been done for a joke."

A card had fallen from the box to the floor. Penny picked it up and offered it to Miss Harmon.

"Listen to this!" the young woman exclaimed, as she scanned the message. " 'Kindly accept this witch doll with the compliments of the sender. It may prove the inspiration for a new creative dance. Only beware of the doll's evil spell, for once accepted the doll cannot be given away.' "

"There, I was right!" cried Felice triumphantly. "The doll will bring you bad luck!"

"Oh, hush, Felice," Miss Harmon said, frowning. "That part about the evil spell is only a joke."

"Is there a name on the card?" inquired Penny.

Miss Harmon shook her head. "No, the witch doll was sent anonymously."

She set the doll on the dresser and stared at it thoughtfully.

"It's such an ugly doll," commented Louise.

"But so ugly it is fascinating," declared Miss Harmon. "There is an original idea back of this doll. I believe I could create a marvelous dance around it—Felice, do you remember my famous bat dance?"

"I was not with you at that time, Miss Harmon."

"No, of course not, I forgot for the moment. Now I could use some of those same steps in this witch doll dance. It would be a sensation!" Miss Harmon's eyes blazed with enthusiasm. Then her face clouded as she glanced again at the little white card. "There is only one thing that bothers me—this strange warning that the doll can never be given away. What could that mean?"

"Nothing in my opinion," said Penny. "I'm not a believer in spells myself."

"It does seem silly," Miss Harmon agreed. "For several months I've needed a new dance to help out my act. This witch doll provides just the inspiration I need."

"Then you will keep the doll, Miss Harmon?" asked the maid softly.

"Yes, why not? I couldn't return it to the sender anyway, for there is no address. I'll work out the new dance immediately and try it here in Riverview! Felice, instead of bringing me bad luck, this doll may be the best thing that ever happened to me!"

"Perhaps," said the maid with a shrug.

Miss Harmon chatted as excitedly as a child about her plans for the new interpretative dance. The girls listened attentively for a time, but Louise could tell that Penny was impatient to leave. She saw her chum casually pick up the little white card which had been sent in the witch doll box. Louise felt certain Penny meant to slip it into her pocket, but before she could do so, Felice glided forward.

"I will take it, Miss," she said.

Penny gave up the card and the maid dropped it into the wastebasket. Miss Harmon, without noticing, went on talking about the scenery which she would have painted to go with her witch doll dance.

At length, the girls declared they must leave.

"Do drop in again," the dancer urged. "I enjoy visitors. And I shall send you tickets when I give the first performance of my witch doll act."

"We'll certainly not miss it," Penny replied.

The girls went down the stairs, past the doorman

who smiled at them, and outside to their car. Not until then did Louise speak.

"Penny, why did you examine that card so carefully? You meant to keep it too, didn't you?"

"Well, the idea may have been roving around in my mind," Penny admitted. "But Felice was too quick for me."

"Why were you so interested in the card anyway?"

"Perhaps because the entire affair is so queer. Did you notice how pleased Felice seemed when Miss Harmon decided to keep the witch doll?"

"Yes, she did act rather funny about it."

"Yet only a moment before Felice had warned Miss Harmon that it would be bad luck to have the doll in her possession."

"Felice doesn't seem to have any great love for her mistress."

"No, that's perfectly evident."

"I suppose some crank sent the doll."

Penny gave her friend a curious glance. "That depends upon whether or not you'd call Nellie Marble a crank," she said dryly.

"Nellie Marble! What *are* you suggesting?"

"Just this. That doll came from Nellie's shop. I've seen too many of those cream colored boxes not to recognize them. You bought one yourself not an hour ago."

"And the note?" Louise gasped. "You think Nellie wrote that silly warning too?"

Penny hesitated a moment and then said quietly:

"No, that's the part which puzzles me. The handwriting wasn't hers. But I'm certain the witch doll came from the Marble Shoppe. And mark my words, Lou, it was never sent as an inspiration for a dance!"

CHAPTER

4

OUT OF THE PAST

AS THE girls walked slowly to their car, Louise urged Penny to explain her meaning in regard to the witch doll.

"It's just a feeling I have," said Penny. "However, I'll prove to you that the box came from the Marble Shoppe."

Entering the car, she unwrapped the French doll purchased by Louise only a few minutes earlier, and disclosed a cream colored carton with fancy, scalloped edges.

"You're right," Louise acknowledged. "It's a dead ringer for the one Miss Harmon received. Still, a number of doll shops may use this type of box."

"I'd like to think so, Lou, but I can't."

"Well, someone may have bought the doll at her shop."

"That's possible," agreed Penny, "but I doubt if Nellie would make up a doll like that old witch except

as a special order. No, somehow I have a feeling she sent it herself."

"Why would she do such a thing?"

"She may have thought it really would prove an inspiration for a dance, though in that case it's queer she didn't write the note. Maybe I'll drop around at the shop tomorrow and ask her a few questions."

Penny backed the car from the alley, and at Louise's request, drove directly to the Sidell home. She declined an invitation to stay for a belated luncheon.

"I'm on my way to the *Star* office to meet Dad," she explained. "See you tomorrow, Louise."

A short ride brought Penny to a large two story stone building which housed the *Riverview Star*. Through the massive plate glass window she could see the giant printing presses rolling out the early afternoon edition. Waving carelessly at Joe, the press room foreman, she went into the building, past the advertising department to the editorial room, jammed with desks.

"Hi, Bright Penny," called Jerry Livingston, court reporter.

Penny nodded in a friendly way, and paused to scan a paper still fresh with the smell of ink. Tucking it under her arm, she opened the door of the office marked "Anthony B. Parker, Editor."

"Hello, Dad," she greeted the lean, slightly gray

man who was busy at his desk. "Working hard as usual?"

"Things have been popping around here today," her father admitted. "We had a fire and a big robbery ten minutes before the edition deadline. I was so hard pressed I had to send out for luncheon. Just finished it as you stepped in the door."

"I'll finish what you didn't," laughed Penny, helping herself to a sandwich from the tray on the desk. She took a large bite, made a grimace, and dropped the sandwich as if it were a hot coal. "Limburger cheese! Dad, how you can eat that stuff—"

"The other one is ham," grinned her father. "With your appetite I should think you could down anything."

"I didn't have any luncheon myself," Penny explained, cautiously sampling the ham sandwich. "Dad, how much would a couple of 'scoops' be worth to you?"

"You didn't run into a good news story by any chance?" Mr. Parker inquired.

"I encountered something interesting," Penny replied seriously. "Measured by your standards it may not be front page, but I think it would make good reading."

She gave an account of her visit to the Nellie Mar-

ble Doll Shoppe, and told of the accident which had led to her meeting with Helene Harmon. To Penny's disappointment, her father did not seem greatly impressed.

"The doll shop story might make a little box feature," he said. "We could run a line or so about the accident to Miss Harmon's car, although it may have been a publicity stunt."

"Oh, it was a genuine accident," Penny insisted. "I saw it with my own blue eyes. And that witch doll—"

"No witch doll in the *Riverview Star*," said Mr. Parker firmly.

"Oh, all right, Dad. But maybe you'll change your mind later on. There's something queer about Nellie sending Miss Harmon that doll."

Mr. Parker made a note of the two stories which his daughter had given him. Penny knew he considered the information of slight consequence, but would run the news more to please her than for any other reason.

"One of these days I'll bring in a story so tremendous you'll have to use headlines a foot high!" she threatened.

"The bigger they come the better I like it."

Penny finished the ham sandwich, and then said significantly:

"Dad, today is Thursday."

"So it is."

"Your daughter's allowance falls due every Thursday. Remember?"

"No chance I'll ever forget with such an expert collector always on my trail," Mr. Parker chuckled. He took a sealed envelope from his desk drawer and gave it to her.

"Many, many thanks, Dad." Penny stooped over the back of her father's chair, planting a kiss on the top of his head. "Remember, this money isn't for me. It's all for Leaping Lena."

Pocketing the envelope, she turned toward the door.

"Tell Mrs. Weems I may be home early for dinner tonight," Mr. Parker said by way of farewell. "And thanks for the business call."

It was nearly three-thirty before Penny reached home. The Parker residence stood on a pleasant, tree-shaded street in the north section of Riverview, and from the high terrace at the rear of the grounds, one commanded a view of the winding river far below. The lawn was velvety green, while irregular beds of shrubbery and tall growing flowers gave the yard charm and privacy.

Penny found the house doors locked, but a key had been left under the mat.

"Mrs. Weems must have gone to the grocery store," she reflected.

Unlocking the door, she let herself into the kitchen.

As usual, it was spick-and-span for Mrs. Weems was a careful housekeeper. Looking about for a note which might have been left for her, and finding none, Penny helped herself to a banana from the fruit dish. She then curled herself on the living room davenport and proceeded to read a book. The clock on the fireplace mantel chimed the hour of five as she finished the last page.

"Goodness, it's getting late!" she exclaimed, jumping up. "Mrs. Weems isn't home yet! I wonder what can be keeping her."

Penny remembered that her father had said he would be home early that evening. Unless Mrs. Weems arrived soon there would be no dinner ready.

"Something must have detained her," she thought. "Maybe I should try to get things started."

She wandered out into the kitchen, and after setting the table, peeled a pan of potatoes and put them on the stove to boil. In the refrigerator she found the makings of a vegetable salad, and Mrs. Weems had baked a chocolate pie before going away.

Penny was soberly contemplating a large raw beef roast, when she heard the housekeeper's step on the front porch. A moment later, Mrs. Weems, flushed and breathless from hurrying, came into the house.

"Oh, I'm glad you started the dinner, Penny," she said. "Dear me, I didn't mean to be so late. I never

should have stayed, but that man was so perfectly marvelous. I've never seen anyone like him in all my life."

Penny gave the housekeeper a sidelong glance. Usually Mrs. Weems was very placid and calm, and it seemed rather strange to hear her talking so enthusiastically.

"Who is this perfectly marvelous man?" Penny asked. "A movie star or a new flame?"

"Penny!" Mrs. Weems reproved. "You talk as if I were a school girl! And I'm sure I don't know where you learn all those slang words."

"I'm very sorry, Mrs. Weems. I meant to say, who is this fascinating gentleman who has produced such a volcanic effect in your life?"

"Oh, you have the wrong impression, Penny. The man didn't interest me personally—I am far too old for such nonsense. But it was marvelous, the things Osandra revealed to me!"

"Osandra," repeated Penny. "That name sounds familiar. Isn't he a medium?"

"Yes, Melvin Osandra has an establishment down on Clark street, a very ornate place. A friend of mine took me to the seance. Penny, will you believe it, I received a message out of the past—a message from a distant cousin of mine who died ten years ago!"

"Don't let Dad hear you say that," Penny warned.

"You know, mediums and the like are sheer poison to him."

"He would say it was all superstitious rot," Mrs. Weems nodded. "To tell you the truth I didn't take any stock in such things myself until today. But this man Osandra is remarkable!"

"What message did he bring you?" asked Penny, trying not to smile too broadly.

"We all sat at a large round table holding hands. Then the lights went out. Osandra went into a trance. He began to shake and moan, and then suddenly a voice cried: 'Maud! Maud!' That was my name, of course. I was so startled I nearly fell from my chair."

"And then what happened?"

"The voice went on, 'This is Fred—Fred.' I thought right away it must be my cousin, Fred Pallman, because I never knew any other person by that name, at least no one who had passed on."

"You and your cousin had been well acquainted?"

"Well, no, I never knew Fred very well," Mrs. Weems admitted. "I only saw him once, but I suppose we must have had a spiritual affinity."

"And this message he sent you?"

"Fred kept saying over and over, 'Maud, are you there? I can't get through—I can't get through—' "

"I take it he never did get the message to you," Penny said dryly.

"No, after awhile the lights went on again. Osandra was quite worn out. He said if I wished to come again he would make another attempt to reach Fred. He believes we'll have better contact next time."

"I'd save my money if I were you, Mrs. Weems."

"Then you think Osandra is just another fraud?"

"I certainly do."

"But how could he learn my name? And it was uncanny the way Fred called to me."

"Fred is a very common name," Penny pointed out. "I imagine Osandra learned that you were Maud by hearing your friend address you."

"I don't remember that she called me Maud at any time," Mrs. Weems frowned. "Now that I'm home, it does sound a little silly. I'd rather you'd not say anything to your father about it, Penny."

"Your secret is safe with me, Mrs. Weems. What shall I do with this roast?"

"I'll look after everything now, Penny. Thank you for getting the dinner started."

Penny kept her word and did not tell her father of Mrs. Weems' visit to Osandra's seance establishment, although it required stern discipline to keep from repeating the story. She had never known the housekeeper to do such a silly thing before. Mrs. Weems was not inclined to be superstitious as a rule and took a sensible outlook on life.

"Osandra must be an unusually good faker," Penny decided. "I wouldn't mind seeing him at work myself."

However, the next day she forgot about the matter, and Mrs. Weems carefully avoided speaking of Melvin Osandra. After breakfast, Penny walked to the Marble Doll Shoppe. The show rooms had been cleaned and Nellie herself was in better spirits than upon the previous day.

"I see you're open for business again," Penny said cheerfully. "Did you decide not to sell to that old lady?"

"I haven't made up my mind yet," Nellie answered. "The police were here late yesterday. They are of the opinion I'll not be bothered again."

Penny chatted with the girl a few minutes, and then remarked casually:

"These are cute boxes you use for your dolls."

"Yes," said Nellie, "I like them. A paper company made them up especially for me."

"I saw one of your boxes yesterday. It was delivered to an actress at the Rialto."

"Oh—" A bright flush stained Nellie's cheeks.

"Nellie *did* send that doll," Penny thought quickly. Aloud she said: "It was the strangest thing, someone gave Miss Harmon a queer creation which for lack of a better name we called a witch doll. Right away

it occurred to me that the doll might have come from your shop."

Nellie did not speak.

"There was a note with the doll," Penny went on after a moment. "A note saying that the doll might prove an inspiration for a dance. Miss Harmon liked the idea very much. You didn't send that doll by any chance?"

Nellie's eyes fell before Penny's steady gaze.

"I—I don't know," she stammered. "Please, don't ask me."

Turning abruptly, she disappeared into the rear room of the doll shop.

CHAPTER

5

MISS HARMON'S WITCH DANCE

"NELLIE MARBLE is a prize mystery if ever there was one," Penny declared, reporting the incident an hour later to her friend, Louise. The two girls sat on the front steps of the Sidell home. "When I asked her if she had sent the witch doll to Miss Harmon, she muttered, 'Don't ask me,' and walked away big as life."

"How rude of her."

"Oh, I don't believe Nellie meant to be rude, Louise. She just didn't wish to answer. I thought she acted almost afraid."

"And you say she didn't come back again?"

"No, I waited a minute, and then left the shop. I guess Nellie figured it was none of my affair."

Penny rose and picked up her purse and gloves.

"You're not leaving?" Louise asked quickly.

"Yes, I want to get home and give the Leaping Lena her weekly bath. I just dropped in to tell you the latest news."

With a cheery "goodbye" flung over her shoulder, Penny went on to her own home. Possessed by a great energy, she carried the hose cart from the garage, equipped herself with nearly all of Mrs. Weems' clean rags and set to work on the car. While she was busy polishing, the housekeeper came out into the yard, wearing her best silk dress and hat.

"I may be gone for an hour or so, Penny," she said self-consciously. "I wish you would look after the telephone while I am away."

"I'll guard it with my life," Penny laughed. She added with a hint of mischief: "Oh, by the way, have you heard from Fred lately?"

"I suppose you'll tease me about that the rest of my life," the housekeeper sighed. "I believe in giving Mr. Osandra the benefit of any doubt."

"I certainly have plenty of doubt," Penny replied. "Are you going there again today, Mrs. Weems?"

"If I were, I'd be too wise to tell you," the housekeeper laughed and walked hurriedly away.

Penny smiled as she went on polishing the metal work of the car. She was positive that Mrs. Weems was on her way to attend another seance at Melvin Osandra's establishment.

"I wouldn't mind going there myself for a lark," she reflected. "Maybe I can persuade Louise to try it one of these days."

When the car shone like a mirror, Penny cleaned the upholstery with a stiff whisk broom. As she lifted out the seat cushion, a bright blue cloth object drew her eye.

"Now what is this?" she asked aloud.

A small silk coin purse had been pushed back behind the seat. Penny had never owned one like it, nor had Louise. Investigating, she discovered that it held a five dollar bill, and change in dimes and nickels.

She whistled softly.

"Leapin' Lena, you must have robbed a banker to get all this booty. Wonder where it came from?"

While she was examining the coin purse, counting the change, the mailman walked up the driveway with his leather pack.

"Letter for you, Penny," he called cheerfully.

She went to meet him, thrusting the coin purse into her pocket. Absently, she tore open the envelope, and two theatre tickets fluttered to the ground.

The accompanying note came from Miss Harmon, who wrote that she would present her witch doll dance the following evening, and would be pleased to have Louise and Penny attend as her guests.

Thrilled by the invitation, Penny lost no time in telephoning her chum.

"The tickets are for tomorrow night?" Louise asked

in dismay. "Then I can't possibly go. Our entire family is scheduled for a big dinner party."

"Perhaps I could get Miss Harmon to change the tickets."

"No, don't do that," Louise said generously. "Take someone else with you. I'll see the show later on."

"It won't be much fun without you. Oh, by the way, Lou, did you lose five dollars?"

"Where would I get five dollars?"

"I found a blue silk coin purse in my car. There was a five dollar bill in it and some change. Also a silver compact."

"A blue silk purse?" repeated Louise. "Why, don't you suppose it belongs to Miss Harmon? She carried one, I know."

"I never once thought of her. You're probably right, Louise. I'll take it to her tomorrow night after the show."

Penny gave careful thought to the companion she would choose for Saturday night's entertainment, and finally decided that her father would be more fun than any of her girl friends.

"I feel highly flattered that you have selected me," Mr. Parker declared when informed of her decision. "But you know I don't care for dancing shows. Besides, I usually work late Saturday night."

"Let the paper put itself to bed for one night,"

Penny pleaded. "This show will be different, Dad."

"Oh, all right," he gave in, "I'll see if I can arrange it."

Eight o'clock Saturday evening found Mr. Parker squirming impatiently beside his daughter in an orchestra seat at the Rialto. Penny amused herself by glancing over the audience, nodding to many persons of her acquaintance.

"These are good seats," Mr. Parker admitted. "But I wish the show would start."

As the theatre was darkened, an usher escorted a short, stout man in shell-rimmed glasses up the aisle. Heads turned as the newcomer paused beside the fourth row, for he was dressed in shabby clothes.

The man crowded past Penny and her father, carelessly trampling over their toes. With no word of apology, he took his seat in the center of their row.

The first few acts of vaudeville were not particularly good. Then at last Miss Harmon's name flashed up in electric lights, and her act came on. Mr. Parker straightened in his seat. A little ripple of anticipation spread over the audience.

Miss Harmon's first numbers were the same as those which Penny had witnessed from back-stage. She stole a glance at her father and was pleased to see that he seemed to be enjoying the show.

However, the pleasure of those in the immediate

vicinity was of short duration, for there was an annoying sound of crackling paper.

"I think that man in the center of the row must be eating cracker jack!" Penny whispered to her father.

She forgot her irritation as Miss Harmon began the last part of her act, the newly created witch dance. Lightning cracked across the darkened stage, and while the orchestra played weird music resembling the roar of a mighty wind, the dancer, garbed in black, a hideous mask over her face, hobbled toward the footlights. She executed a series of grotesque steps, her nimble feet flying faster and faster as the music increased in tempo.

Penny and her father sat in rapt attention as did the entire audience. And then above the music, they became aware of a disturbing sound. Someone deliberately had hissed the dancer. The derisive noise was repeated, so loud that it could be heard throughout the theatre.

Miss Harmon faltered for an instant in her dance, then went bravely on. An usher came hurriedly down the aisle, pausing beside Mr. Parker's seat. He motioned toward the man in the center of the row.

"Silence," he ordered sternly.

The man rose unsteadily to his feet. His face was convulsed with anger as he shook his fist at the usher.

"You can't make me keep quiet!" he shouted in a loud voice. "I paid for my ticket and I came to see a good show! That dance is evil—do you hear me—evil!"

CHAPTER

6

THE DIAMOND NECKLACE

CRIES OF "sit down," "throw him out," arose from the audience. The excited little man in the fourth row kept shaking his fist and muttering to himself, until he was seized by two ushers.

"Don't touch me!" he shouted angrily. "Let me alone."

Paying no heed to his struggles, the ushers escorted the man down the aisle. His loud voice could be heard for a moment and then it faded away. Once more the attention of the audience came back to the stage, and when Miss Harmon's witch dance ended, generous applause greeted her efforts. She was forced to take many bows.

"What a pity the act was ruined by that horrid man," Penny whispered to her father. "I believe he created a disturbance on purpose to detract from her dance."

"Oh, I doubt that it was done maliciously," replied

Mr. Parker. "He seemed to think the dance was sinful. Probably another crank."

"Dad, do you care about seeing the remainder of the show?"

"Not particularly."

"Then let's slip back-stage before Miss Harmon leaves the theatre. I'd like you to meet her. And I'll give her that coin purse I found in my car."

"All right," Mr. Parker agreed. "Let's make it a speedy call. I need my beauty sleep."

The doorman remembered Penny from her last visit. He bowed agreeably and made no objection as she and her father moved past his chair.

"We came to see Miss Harmon," Penny explained.

"Just go right on up to her dressing room," the doorman directed. "Second door to your left."

Penny and her father went up the stairway. As they paused near Miss Harmon's dressing room, the maid, Felice, came down the hall carrying a large bouquet of roses.

"I beg your pardon," said Penny politely. "Is Miss Harmon receiving callers?"

Felice stared coldly.

"No, she's too tired to see anyone this evening. You'll have to come back some other time."

"Oh," murmured Penny, disappointed. "I did wish to see her. I found a purse which I thought—"

The door of the dressing room had opened. Miss Harmon, garbed in a long, flowing silk robe, peered out into the hall.

"Well, I was certain I recognized your voice!" she cried gaily. "I saw you in the audience, Miss Parker. I hoped you would come."

"Your maid said you weren't receiving visitors tonight," Penny stammered. "We don't wish to intrude."

"Felice told you that?"

"I only said it to spare you, Miss Harmon," said the maid quickly. "You were so worn out tonight."

"What gave you such an idea? Why, I never felt better in my life! Felice, after this kindly consult my wishes before issuing orders."

"Yes, Miss Harmon," the maid muttered, averting her eyes.

"Do come right in," the dancer cordially bade her guests.

Penny presented her father to Miss Harmon, who, aware that he was a newspaper owner, greeted him a trifle coyly.

"Did you like my witch dance?" she asked.

"Indeed we did," Mr. Parker replied with sincerity. "The entire act was clever."

"That's high praise from Dad," Penny laughed. "As a rule he doesn't care for dancing."

"I could have wept when that man created such a

disturbance," Miss Harmon went on. "He nearly ruined my act."

"You carried on marvelously," Penny praised. "If I had been in your place, it would have confused me."

"The dance was a success," Miss Harmon said proudly. "I could sense the feeling of the audience. I really am grateful to that anonymous person who sent me the witch doll."

Penny thought instantly of Nellie Marble, but having no proof that the girl was responsible for the strange gift, she withheld comment. Mr. Parker moved restlessly in his chair, a signal that he was impatient to leave.

"Oh, by the way," said Penny, after thanking Miss Harmon for the theatre tickets, "did you by any chance lose a coin purse when you were riding in my car?"

"Not to my knowledge," replied the dancer. "I do have a blue silk purse, but I'm quite certain it hasn't been lost."

"This one is blue." Penny opened her own pocketbook and displayed the coin container.

"Why, it *is* mine! You say I left it in your car?"

"Yes, it had dropped down behind the cushion."

"Well, if that isn't a good joke," laughed the dancer. "I never even missed it. Thank you for returning it to me."

She accepted the purse, glanced curiously inside, and dropped it on her dressing table. On a lace doily beside the coin container lay a beautiful, sparkling necklace. Miss Harmon noticed that Penny's gaze had focused upon it.

"I know what you're thinking," she declared, picking up the necklace. "I am very careless about my possessions. Felice says I throw these diamonds around as if they were paste."

"If that necklace were mine, I'd have it in a bank vault," remarked Mr. Parker.

"Diamonds were meant to be worn," laughed Miss Harmon. "I never could endure imitations. But you're right, I really should take better care of my things. Felice, please put this necklace away."

"Yes, Miss Harmon."

The maid, who had been arranging flowers in a vase, moved forward and took the diamonds from her mistress. Penny imagined that as Felice fingered the jewels, a gloating expression came into her dark eyes, but she could not be sure for the young woman quickly turned her back.

Locking the necklace into a little gold jewel case, the maid brought the key back to Miss Harmon.

"Aren't you afraid someone may steal your diamonds?" Mr. Parker asked in amazement.

"Oh, I always keep the dressing room locked when I am not here."

Mr. Parker said no more, and a moment later he and Penny arose to leave. Miss Harmon declared she would walk as far as the stage door with them. They went out into the hallway, leaving Felice alone in the dressing room.

Penny and her father exchanged a quick glance. The same thought flashed through their minds. Miss Harmon indeed was trusting to leave her jewels in the hands of such an unfriendly maid.

"The show is drawing large crowds," the dancer declared cheerfully, leading the way toward the stairs. "I expect to be here in Riverview at least another week, so I hope you'll come to see me again before I leave."

"I should like to," said Penny.

"Unless I'm sadly mistaken, the witch dance will be the most successful number I have ever created," the young woman went on enthusiastically. "How ridiculous of that man to shout that it was evil! I never heard of anything so silly—"

They had reached the narrow stairway. Miss Harmon, slightly in advance of the others, suddenly halted, her voice dying away in a choked cry. She stared toward a window cut into the wall near the foot of the staircase.

"Look!" she whispered.

As Penny and her father glanced quickly toward the window, Miss Harmon's high heel seemed to catch in a torn place on the stair carpet. The young woman reached out to grasp the hand railing, missed it, and stumbled. Before Mr. Parker or Penny could offer a helping hand, she pitched forward, and with a scream of terror fell headlong down the flight of steps.

CHAPTER

7

A SHADOW ON THE WINDOW

MISS HARMON struck the cement floor at the foot of the stairs, and lay perfectly still. In horror, Penny and her father rushed down to pick her up. The doorman, summoned by the young woman's shrill scream, came running to assist.

"Are you hurt?" Mr. Parker asked, gently raising Miss Harmon from the floor.

A deep gash had been cut in the dancer's forehead just above her left eye. Penny stopped the flow of blood with her clean handkerchief.

Miss Harmon did not try to answer Mr. Parker's question, but she stirred painfully. She moved her arms and legs, satisfying herself that no bones had been broken.

"Better get a doctor," Mr. Parker said to the doorman. "Miss Harmon is badly shaken."

"No, wait," the dancer ordered. "I'll be all right in a minute."

She allowed Mr. Parker and Penny to lift her to a

standing position. The doorman brought a chair, and seating Miss Harmon on it, the two men carried her up the stairs to the dressing room.

Penny, running ahead, flung open the door. Her unexpected arrival caught Felice by surprise, for the maid had been examining Miss Harmon's jewel case. She whirled around, a look of guilt upon her face.

"Miss Harmon fell downstairs," Penny said, giving the maid a sharp glance.

While Felice stood helplessly by, they stretched the injured woman on the chaise lounge. She moaned softly with pain.

"Cold packs," Mr. Parker ordered.

Felice did not understand what he meant, so Penny ran to the bathroom for heavy towels which she soaked in cold water. She wrung them out, and applied them to Miss Harmon's head.

"Oh, that feels good," the dancer murmured gratefully.

"I think I should send for a doctor," suggested Mr. Parker.

"No, please," Miss Harmon protested, "I'll soon be all right. I'm only bruised."

"You have a very ugly cut on your forehead," Penny said. "It should be bandaged."

Miss Harmon raised her hand to her head, feeling of the gash.

"Felice, my mirror," she requested in a frightened voice. "Oh, if I am marked my career will be finished!"

"I don't believe there will be a scar," Penny assured her.

Miss Harmon carefully studied her face in the mirror, and then dropped back against the pillows.

"Every muscle in my poor body is battered," she complained. "I'll never be able to dance tomorrow."

"No, of course not," Mr. Parker agreed. "You had a very hard fall."

"But I shall dance," Miss Harmon contradicted herself. "I can't afford to drop out of the show even for a day. I'll take a Turkish bath. Perhaps that will keep me from getting so stiff and muscle bound."

"My advice to you is to remain in bed for several days," said Mr. Parker. "And you should have the doctor."

"No. The last time I called a doctor he sent me to the hospital. I gained ten pounds and lost my place in the show!"

"If you're so determined I suppose there is nothing more to say. At least we'll bandage up that cut. Felice, will you get me a piece of gauze and some tape?"

"Gauze?" repeated the maid in a stupid way. "We don't have any here."

"You might try the drugstore across the street. They probably have some."

Felice scowled for she did not care to do the errand. She glanced questioningly toward her mistress.

"Oh, never mind, Felice," Miss Harmon said. "A bandage would look so disfiguring. We'll let it go this way."

Thus overruled, Mr. Parker shrugged and reached for his hat. He felt there was nothing more he could do for the young woman.

"How did the accident happen, Miss?" asked the old doorman who had lingered in the dressing room.

"I don't know," Miss Harmon replied, a queer expression coming over her face. "I must have tripped on the carpet. I was glancing at the window—"

"Did you see something which startled you?" questioned Penny, watching the dancer closely.

Miss Harmon hesitated. "Yes," she answered in a low tone. "I thought—but probably I was mistaken."

"What did you think you saw?" prompted Mr. Parker.

Miss Harmon half raised up from the pillow and a little shiver went over her body. "It was a shadow," she whispered, "or perhaps a grotesque human figure, outlined against the window. Oh, it was horrible!"

"Can't you describe the shadow?" Penny urged.

The dancer shook her head. "My impression was such a fleeting one. The shadow might have been made

by a person who was terribly deformed—possibly by a hunchback."

"It's real bad luck to see anything like that," declared Felice in awe.

Ignoring the maid's remark, Mr. Parker turned to the old doorman.

"You might take a look around the building," he suggested. "However, the chances are that if anyone were at the window, he'd be gone by now."

"I'll search the alley right away," the old man promised, eager to be of service. "If there's any peepin' Tom around, I'll get him!"

After the doorman had gone, Miss Harmon lay for a moment with her eyes closed.

"This makes the second accident I've had within the past week," she said thoughtfully. "And yesterday I ran a splinter deep into my finger. So many things seem to have gone wrong."

"Maybe you never should have kept that witch doll," Felice interposed.

"What has that to do with it?" questioned Miss Harmon.

"The witch doll may be an omen of bad luck," Felice hinted maliciously. "I'd never have kept it if I had been in your place."

"Superstitious rubbish!" exclaimed Mr. Parker.

A man of brief patience, he had no tolerance for persons who professed to believe in the supernatural. He had made up his mind that the maid either stupidly or deliberately was playing upon the feelings of her mistress.

Felice, angered by Mr. Parker's blunt words, glared at him, and coldly turned her back.

"A warning note was sent with the doll," Miss Harmon commented. "I was told that I could not give the doll away. At the time I did not think very much about it."

"I'd give it no thought now," said Penny. "How could a doll bring one bad luck? Why, if anything, it really has brought you good fortune. Wasn't your witch doll dance a tremendous success?"

"Yes," agreed Miss Harmon, her face brightening. "You are right. I don't see how the witch doll could have been responsible for my accident tonight."

Footsteps were heard in the hallway, and the door of the dressing room suddenly opened. The old man, Hank Buntsell, who had been sent to search the alley, came hurriedly inside. He closed the door behind him in a furtive manner.

"Come quick, sir," he said, addressing Mr. Parker.

"Did you find anyone in the alley?" asked the newspaper owner, surprised by the man's urgent tone.

"Not a *person*," answered the doorman, and those in the room saw that his eyes were dilated with fear. "But on the wall—ah, sir, it's sure enough to scare the wits from a body! Come and I will show you."

CHAPTER

8

"BEWARE!"

DEEPLY MYSTIFIED, Anthony Parker followed the old man from the dressing room. Penny could not bear to be left behind. Abandoning Miss Harmon to the care of the maid, she quickly followed.

"Well, what did you find?" Mr. Parker asked again, as he went down the stairway with Hank.

"I don't rightly know, sir. It's something mighty queer like on the wall."

The old man guided Penny and her father out the rear door of the theatre into the dark alley. Mr. Parker glanced sharply up and down but there was no one in sight.

"Nothing seems amiss," he remarked.

"Follow me," Hank ordered in a shaky voice, switching on his flashlight. "Careful where you step. This alleyway is full of old bottles and broken glass."

He led Penny and her father to the rear wall of the theatre building, only a few feet from a low window.

"What seems to be wrong?" Mr. Parker asked im-

patiently. He did not like the old man's secretive actions.

Hank flashed the beam of his light on the wall near the window. In the bright circle a black silhouette, perhaps five inches in diameter, became discernible. Clearly it was a sinister figure in either dark ink or paint meant to represent a witch.

"My word! What is that?" Mr. Parker demanded.

"The figure is a duplication of the witch doll Miss Harmon received!" exclaimed Penny.

"I thought it would give you a start like it did me," declared Hank. "And see this, sir."

He lowered his flashlight beam so that it illuminated a space directly below the figure of the witch. Beneath the picture, in large bold letters, appeared the printed message:

"H.H. Beware!"

"Why, it's a warning!" gasped Penny. "Dad, do you suppose the letters 'H.H.' stand for Helene Harmon?"

"No, of course not," he answered gruffly, but Penny thought his voice lacked conviction.

"It's mighty queer, sir," Hank muttered. "I know for a fact, this drawing wasn't here on the wall before tonight."

"How can you be sure?" asked Mr. Parker.

"Why, I walk through this here alley every day.

I'd have noticed the picture if it had been on the wall."

Penny rubbed an exploratory finger over the drawing and ruefully held it up for her father to see.

"Wet paint. He is right, Dad. The picture was drawn on the wall only a few minutes ago. Look at my finger."

"Did you see anyone in the alley when you came out of the theatre?" Mr. Parker asked the old man.

"No, sir, but I thought maybe I heard someone running down the far end of the alley. I couldn't be sure."

"Let me have your flash a minute."

Mr. Parker took the light and directed the beam over the ground near the window. In the moist earth several large footprints were visible.

"Those prints were made by a man, not a boy," Mr. Parker declared, comparing the size with that of his own shoe. "This is evidently the work of a crank or a practical joker."

"Dad, Miss Harmon must have seen the person silhouetted against the window," Penny reminded him. "She was terrified because the shadow seemed so grotesque."

"I judge Miss Harmon is a woman easily upset," replied Mr. Parker dryly. "Now there's no need for her to hear about this. A little soap and water will take care of the witch."

"I get you, sir," said Hank. "I'll bring a bucket of suds right away."

"Listen!" Penny warned in an undertone. "Someone is coming."

Before they could move away from the window, Miss Harmon's voice broke upon their ears.

"Are you here?" she called anxiously.

Supported by Felice, the dancer came into the circle of light. Mr. Parker snapped off the flash beam so that she would not see the sinister object on the wall.

"You never should have come out here," he said in a stern tone.

"I had to learn what was wrong."

"We found a few footprints," Mr. Parker said carelessly. "Nothing worth worrying about. You may see for yourself that the alley is quite deserted."

Miss Harmon appeared satisfied and started to turn away. However, just at that moment, Felice, who had crowded close to the wall, gave a shriek of terror.

"Mercy upon us, what is this?" she cried. "It's something painted on the building!"

Miss Harmon went quickly to the wall, trying to distinguish the object which had drawn the maid's attention.

"You have very keen eyes, Felice," Mr. Parker observed, switching on the light.

"Why, it looks like an old witch!" Miss Harmon murmured in awe.

"That's what it is!" cried Felice. "And there's something printed under the picture."

" 'H.H. Beware,' " Miss Harmon read aloud. "Why, it's a warning intended for me!"

"Didn't I tell you it was a mistake to keep that evil looking doll!" exclaimed Felice with smug satisfaction.

"I wish now that I had never seen the doll," Miss Harmon shuddered. "This warning frightens me."

"I would not consider it as a warning," declared Mr. Parker. "I fail to see that the drawing on the wall has any connection with you or your witch dance."

"But those initials—'H.H.' "

"Aren't you rather imaginative to assume that they stand for your name, Miss Harmon? Why not toss that witch doll into a convenient garbage can and forget about it?"

"The doll cannot be given away," reminded Felice. "The card said—"

"Bosh!" snapped Mr. Parker. "Take my advice, Miss Harmon, and forget all this nonsense. That's exactly what it is—nonsense."

"And what about the lovely dance which I created?"

"Why, keep it in the act, of course. I'll see that you get a good write-up in the theatre column of the *Star*."

"Oh, that's very kind of you," Miss Harmon beamed.

Mr. Parker turned toward Felice. "You never should have allowed Miss Harmon to come out here in the cold night air," he said sternly. "Take her back at once, and put her to bed, or she'll be in no condition to dance again."

"Such a nice old tyrant," Miss Harmon laughed. "But I shall take your advice, Mr. Parker. Good evening."

Clinging to Felice's arm, she moved painfully away. When the two women had vanished beyond the corner of the building, Mr. Parker added in an undertone:

"I wish I had given her another piece of advice. She should get rid of that worthless maid."

"I think you spoke enough of your mind," Penny giggled. "But I agree with you, Dad. If it hadn't been for Felice, Miss Harmon never would have noticed that strange warning."

Mr. Parker nodded, and turning to Hank, said briefly: "Even if she has seen the drawing, I believe I'd get it off the wall anyway."

"Yes, sir," replied the old man respectfully. "I'll take care of it right away."

Remarking that the hour was late, Mr. Parker escorted his daughter to the waiting car. When they were speeding toward home, Penny mischievously in-

quired if he meant to publish anything about the witch doll warning in the *Star*.

"Certainly not, Penny. The entire affair is ridiculous. It occurred to me just now that all this witch business may have been done as a publicity stunt."

"Newspaper owners are too suspicious," Penny said teasingly. "I can't believe Miss Harmon would risk breaking her neck just to get a line or two in the paper."

"No, the accident seemed genuine enough. And I liked Miss Harmon, although she seemed rather frivolous. The thing which struck me, was how quickly Felice discovered that picture on the wall."

"Yes, she went right for it, Dad, just as if she knew where to look!"

"Of course we may have imagined that part. The drawing undoubtedly was the work of some crank."

"I think I know who sent that witch doll to Miss Harmon," Penny revealed.

"You do?"

"Yes, it came from Nellie Marble's Doll Shoppe. But when I questioned Nellie about it, she wouldn't answer."

"Is this girl the type who would enjoy playing a practical joke?"

"Absolutely not. Nellie is as serious as a monk."

"Then perhaps you are mistaken."

"I don't think so, Dad. I suppose you'll laugh, but I can't help feeling there is something sinister about the entire affair."

"Sinister is a strong word to use," Mr. Parker smiled. "No, Penny, in the absence of any real proof, I refuse to take your witch doll seriously."

During the remainder of the ride, he made a point of discussing diverse subjects, but Penny noticed that her father seemed rather moody. She decided he was giving more thought to the events of the evening than he would have her believe.

True to his promise, Mr. Parker awarded Miss Harmon considerable space in the theatre column of the *Star*, praising her witch dance highly. Other newspapers in Riverview likewise commented favorably upon the young woman's ability.

The following day while Penny was pouring over the various theatrical notices, Louise dropped by to ask her if she would care to go for a ride in the country.

"I promised Mother I'd deliver that doll and a basket of food to a poor family by the name of Slocer," she explained. "They live out on the river road."

"Why, yes, I'll go," said Penny. "I have a lot to tell you about last night. My, but you missed the excitement!"

"It just makes me sick I couldn't see the show. Tell me all about it."

Penny related the strange events of the evening as they motored along the river road in the Sidell car.

"Exciting things like that *would* happen when I couldn't be there," Louise complained. "Oh, I wish I could have seen that drawing on the wall! Do you think it was really intended as a warning for Miss Harmon?"

"Yes, I do, Louise. But I don't think Nellie had any part in it. For one thing, Dad found a man's footprints near the wall. And Miss Harmon claimed she saw a grotesque figure at the window."

"It gives me the creeps just to hear about it," Louise said with a shiver. "But my! I wish I'd been there!"

The car had drawn up in front of a tumble-down, unpainted cottage. A day's washing flapped lazily on the sagging clothes line which stretched from the porch to a tree. The picket fence had lost many of its teeth and the untidy yard was cluttered with discarded objects. A few chickens scratched industriously in the dirt.

"This is the Slocer place," said Louise, taking her basket from the car.

The girls rapped on the door. After several minutes it was opened on a tiny crack, and a very dirty child

of perhaps eight or nine, peered timidly out at them.

"Hello, Jeanie," said Louise, "we've brought you something."

The child's face brightened, and she quickly opened the door.

"Mama isn't here," she explained before Louise could ask. "She went down to Riverview 'bout an hour ago to see if she could get some washing to do."

"Is your father away too?" inquired Louise.

"Oh, he's always gone," said the child, her mouth twisting scornfully.

As Louise and Penny well knew, Darrel Slocer had never provided well for his family. The man worked in a nearby factory, but money slipped easily through his fingers. He spent sums in many foolish ways, often leaving his wife and child without proper food or clothing.

"I suppose your father is at the factory," Louise remarked, setting down her basket on the kitchen table.

Jeanie shook her head. "Pop's only workin' half days now. I reckon he's down at Osandra's, same as usual."

"Osandra's?" Penny asked quickly. "Do you mean Melvin Osandra's seance establishment."

"Sure, that's where he always goes soon as he gets his pay check. Mama begs him not to do it, but he won't pay any 'tention to her."

"Someone should talk with that man Osandra,"

Penny declared. "It's not right for him to take money which should go for food and clothing."

"Mama went to see Osandra," Jeanie said gravely. "She asked him not to let Pop come there any more. But he just laughed."

Louise unloaded the basket of food, and gave the child the doll which had been purchased at Nellie Marble's Shoppe.

"Oh, did you bring that for me?" Jeanie cried, her eyes sparkling. "I never had a real doll before! She's just beautiful!"

The child's gratitude more than repaid Louise and Penny for the slight inconvenience which the drive into the country had cost them. In a few minutes they left the house.

"I'll tell Mama you were here," Jeanie promised, following them to the car. "She'll be awful glad to get the food. We haven't had anything 'cept potatoes for most a week."

As they drove back toward the city, Louise remarked that she wished something could be done to help the Slocer family.

"Jeanie's father really isn't such a bad sort," she said. "He's merely weak where money is concerned. What a pity that he wastes his wages on that medium!"

"Something should be done," Penny agreed. "Osandra would refuse to take the man's money if

he had any decency! Louise, let's go there and talk with him!"

"Talk with Osandra? Oh, that would take courage, Penny, and I doubt if it would do a speck of good."

"Perhaps not, but we could try. Anyway, I have a great curiosity to see this wonderful man, Osandra."

When Louise did not reply, Penny was silent for a moment. Then her eyes began to dance with excitement.

"I have a marvelous idea, Lou!" she cried. "Let's go there now!"

"What's so marvelous about that idea? I don't think much of it myself."

Penny was not to be discouraged.

"We'll pretend we are reporters from the *Star* sent to interview the Great Osandra," she went on with mounting enthusiasm. "He'll break down and answer all our questions about himself! Oh, Louise, you just have to say *yes*. We'll have a regular lark!"

CHAPTER

9

THE GREAT OSANDRA

"I MUST be getting weak minded," sighed Louise, more than an hour later, as they pulled up at their destination. "Otherwise, I'm sure I'd have no part in this crazy scheme of yours."

The Sidell car had been parked on Clark Street, and the two girls sat peering up at a dingy looking two story frame building which the corner filling station man had assured them housed the seance establishment of the Great Melvin Osandra.

"Mrs. Weems called this a magnificent place," said Penny. "She must have had delusions of grandeur. Either that or Osandra hypnotised her."

"Let's not go inside. I don't like the appearance of the building."

"What!" demanded Penny. "Not go inside after wasting an hour trying to find the place? It's probably better looking inside."

She caught Louise by the hand and pulled her from the car.

"I don't like this idea of pretending we're reporters, Penny. I won't know how to conduct myself."

"Oh, that's easy," laughed Penny. "Reporters just act breezy and superior and ask a lot of personal questions no one cares to answer. Leave all the talking to me."

"I shall."

At the entrance to the building, the girls came upon a sign which read:

"Melvin Osandra—Room 208. The Public Invited."

Louise halted abruptly. "I'll not go another step unless you promise to be careful what you say to Osandra about the Slocer family. There's no telling how he might react."

"I'll be cautious."

They went up the creaking stairway, opened the door of Room 208 and found themselves in a small reception hall provided with a few straight-back chairs. While the girls were looking around, a tiny window in the wall swung back on its hinges. A thin-faced, dark-eyed man with a large, bulging forehead, peered out at them.

"If you are here for communion with the spirits," he said in a deep voice, "the next seance will be held at four o'clock."

"Oh, we came to see Mr. Osandra," replied Penny. "Is he here now?"

The piercing black eyes probed her face until she felt decidedly uncomfortable.

"Your name?" he demanded.

"Penelope B. Parker," said Penny with dignity. "I represent the *Riverview Star*."

"Oh, you're a reporter," the man replied warily. "What is it you want?"

"I should like to interview Mr. Osandra. May we see him please?"

"You are talking with him now. I am the Great Melvin Osandra."

"I—I'm very glad to meet you," Penny stammered, caught off guard. "I should like to ask you a few questions."

"Proceed."

"Where were you born, Mr. Osandra?"

"In a hospital," replied the man without a flicker of a smile.

"When did you first feel the—" Penny groped for a word. —"the call to become a medium?"

"I do not designate myself by such a cheap name," Melvin Osandra said coldly. "Tell me why you were sent here?"

"Why, it was a little idea of my own. I thought our paper might be interested in an interview. You are such a well known man, Mr. Osandra."

The medium did not respond to Penny's flattery.

"I have had experience with reporters before," he said. "They try to write stories which make me appear ridiculous in the eyes of the public. That hurts my business. And then the police start investigating. I'll thank you to keep my name out of the *Riverview Star*."

Melvin Osandra slammed shut the little window and the girls were left alone in the waiting room. They hastily retreated down the stairway to the street.

"Your idea was a marvelous one, I must say," teased Louise. "We certainly learned a lot."

"Oh, well," Penny shrugged, "Dad says a good reporter has to learn to bounce when he's thrown out. This was good experience."

"Thank you, I have no ambition to become a reporter."

"Just to make the day complete suppose we visit Nellie," Penny laughed.

"Why should we go there?"

"I'd like to learn if she's sold her shop."

"You're certainly in a question asking mood today," Louise sighed, but she agreed to drive her chum to the doll shop.

The girls parked across the street from the building. Curtains had been half-drawn down over the windows, but the front door stood slightly ajar. Without intending to be particularly quiet, Louise and Penny entered

the shop and gave no warning of their arrival. The main room of the doll shop was deserted. Dust lay thickly on the counters.

Thinking that Nellie probably was in the rear room, Penny stepped quickly to the doorway. The owner of the doll shop was sitting by the kitchen range, busy with her sewing. She had not heard the girls enter.

"Hello, Nellie," said Penny. "You'll strain your eyes working so hard."

With a cry of alarm, the girl sprang from her chair. Nervously, she thrust the dark colored cloth, which she had been sewing, behind her back.

"Oh, you startled me!" she exclaimed.

"We didn't mean to," replied Penny. "Busy?"

"I—I was just doing a little sewing," Nellie stammered. "Did you wish something?"

With a deft movement she whipped the dark cloth into her sewing basket.

It was clear to Penny and Louise that they had intruded upon Nellie at an awkward moment. The girl had not seemed in the least pleased to see them.

"Oh, we just dropped around to ask if you had sold your business," Penny said carelessly. "But I see you're still here."

"I am here—yes," Nellie answered. "However, I turned the shop over to Mrs. Farmer this morning."

"Then you're working for her?" Louise asked.

"I don't know how long I'll remain. Only a few days I hope."

"You don't care for your employer?" Penny inquired shrewdly. She observed that the girl had been crying.

"Mrs. Farmer is very peculiar. She hasn't paid me for the shop yet."

"I hope she doesn't mean to cheat you," said Penny.

Nellie made no reply. She moved to the window and stood gazing down the street.

"Mrs. Farmer will be coming back any minute," she said nervously. "I—I think you ought to go before she gets here."

Louise stared in disbelief, wondering if she had heard correctly. Before she could speak, Penny took her by the elbow and steered her toward the door.

When the two girls were on the street, a safe distance from the doll shop, Louise gave vent to her feelings.

"I'll never go back there again as long as I live! Why, Nellie practically ordered us out!"

"I think she was afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Yes, she didn't wish Mrs. Farmer to find us at the shop. Lou, did you notice that doll she was making when we came in?"

"Was it a doll? I didn't see what it was, she whisked it out of sight so fast."

"I saw it quite plainly," said Penny. "I don't wonder she didn't care to have us see it."

"Just what was it anyhow?" Louise inquired.

"Can't you guess?" asked Penny. "A witch doll, for all the world like the one she sent Miss Harmon!"

CHAPTER

10

MISS HARMON'S LOSS

PENNY HUMMED a gay little tune as she clattered down the steps two at a time and slid into her chair at the breakfast table. Mr. Parker, who had just been served by Mrs. Weems, sat reading his morning paper.

"Is that you, Dad, behind all the murder headlines?" inquired Penny cheerfully.

Mr. Parker lowered the paper, smiling apologetically.

"Good morning, Penny. I acquired that bad habit years ago. But here is a story which may interest you. Your friend, Miss Harmon, finally made the front page."

"What happened to her?" asked Penny, accepting the paper from her father.

Mr. Parker indicated a story in the left column.

"Miss Harmon's diamond necklace was stolen last night. Doesn't surprise me a bit."

The newspaper story disclosed that the dancer's necklace, valued at ten thousand dollars, had been

worn to the Black Cat, a fashionable night club. Miss Harmon had not discovered her loss until she had left the cafe and was in a taxi cab. She had then notified the police.

"The necklace may have been lost and not stolen," said Penny. "Miss Harmon gave me the impression of being a very careless person."

"She threw her diamonds around as if they were glass. I trust the necklace was insured. The story doesn't say."

Mr. Parker frowned, slightly irritated because a reporter on the *Star* had neglected to include every available fact in the news account. He glanced up as Penny said:

"Dad, didn't you think Miss Harmon's maid seemed rather interested in that diamond necklace?"

"Now that you mention it, yes. But apparently, no blame is attached to her."

"Just the same, she might have taken it."

"Oh, I'd not consider it very likely if the necklace disappeared at the Black Cat."

"From this story one can't be sure where it was lost. Perhaps Miss Harmon didn't know herself."

"Mr. Parker folded the paper, and slipping it into his coat pocket, began to eat his scrambled eggs and toast.

"How would you like a little job this morning, Penny?" he presently inquired.

"Shining shoes?"

"No, I thought you might enjoy doing a bit of reportorial work for me."

"I'm afraid I'm not very good at it," Penny said, thinking of the Great Osandra.

"You are a very keen observer," complimented her father. "And you do have a way with people. Now Miss Harmon likes you, Penny. I thought she might be more willing to talk with you than one of the regular reporters."

"I wouldn't mind interviewing Miss Harmon," Penny declared, brightening. "Maybe I could find out if Felice really did steal that necklace."

"You might bring in her signed confession! No, seriously, Penny, the *Star* concerns itself with fact, not fancy. Don't strive for the spectacular. Just learn any facts you can from Miss Harmon, and write them up in a simple, interesting way."

"All right," grinned Penny. "Hold the forms open until I get to the office with my big story."

She hastened through her breakfast, and presented herself at the theatre shortly after nine. Miss Harmon had not yet arrived from her hotel, so she spent a half hour chatting with Hank. He told her that he had washed the witch doll picture from the rear wall of

the building. There had been no new disturbance.

Shortly after nine-thirty, Miss Harmon came with her maid. She greeted Penny warmly, and conducting her to the dressing room, began an excited account of the robbery.

"I am certain the necklace was stolen, although I didn't actually see it taken. I discovered that it was missing immediately after I left the Black Cat last evening."

"What time was that?"

Miss Harmon hesitated, and then replied, "I'm not sure. Shortly after midnight, I believe."

"Did you notice any suspicious looking persons at the Black Cat while you were there?"

"No, I can't say I did, although one man stared at me in a peculiar way."

"Then why are you convinced the necklace was stolen? Couldn't you have dropped it?"

"I went back to inquire," Miss Harmon said uneasily. "I am sure the necklace was stolen."

"You had it insured?"

"Only for half of its value."

"And was Felice with you at the time of the robbery?"

"No, I wasn't," said the maid sharply. "If you care to know why all this happened, just take a look at that evil thing!"

She indicated the witch doll which had been perched on Miss Harmon's dresser. The dancer, too, turned her head to stare at the ugly creation.

"All my bad luck did start at the time that doll came into my possession," she murmured. "First I had that hard fall, and now my necklace has been stolen."

"Mark my words, Miss Harmon, it's only the beginning," Felice added darkly. "I'd get rid of that doll if I were you!"

As she finished speaking, someone rapped on the dressing room door. Felice put aside her mending and went to answer the summons.

"Why, no one is here," she said. "But someone left this letter."

She picked up a sealed envelope from the floor and offered it to her mistress. Miss Harmon quickly examined the message. She sank down in a chair, her hands trembling.

"What is it?" asked Penny in alarm.

"Another warning," whispered the dancer. "The note says, 'Remove the witch doll dance from your act or harm will befall you.' "

Penny examined the message which had been printed with a pencil. The writer had not signed his name.

"What shall I do?" Miss Harmon asked in dismay. "The witch dance is the best thing I've ever done. It

is drawing large crowds to the theatre. I hate to abandon it, yet I am afraid to disregard this warning."

"I should if I were you," said Penny. "Dad says only cowards send anonymous notes."

"I don't know," Miss Harmon murmured, turning to stare at the witch doll on the dresser. "That thing is beginning to give me the creeps. I wish I could send it back to its owner."

"If it will make you feel better why don't you?" Penny said before she thought. "I have an idea where that doll came from."

"You have?" the dancer cried eagerly. "Where?"

"From a doll shop out near the edge of town."

"Could you take me there?"

"Why, yes, I suppose so," Penny said reluctantly. She was sorry that she had revealed her knowledge.

"Felice, wrap up the doll at once," ordered Miss Harmon. "And then go to Mr. Burns, the manager, and tell him I am changing my act again."

"You'll give up the witch dance?" Penny asked in amazement.

"For the time being, yes. This warning alarms me."

Penny tried to convince Miss Harmon that she was very foolish to abandon the dance, but the young woman remained firm in her decision. Felice was dispatched to the manager's office. She returned in a few minutes, followed by Mr. Burns.

"What is this, Miss Harmon?" he began abruptly, ignoring Penny's presence. "Your maid tells me you are taking the witch dance out of your act."

"Yes, I'll substitute my former number."

"But the witch dance is drawing a crowd," the man protested. "You can't change twice in a week, Miss Harmon. I insist that you leave your act as it is."

"And if I should refuse?"

"You'll not if you're as sensible as I think you are, Miss Harmon. Why, that dance will put you in big-time again."

"Perhaps you are right," Miss Harmon said slowly. "I'll leave the act as it is."

Penny, who was watching Felice at the moment, saw the maid's face darken with displeasure. However, after Mr. Burns had gone, she offered no comment upon her mistress' decision.

"At least I shall return that witch doll to its owner," said Miss Harmon. "It will be a satisfaction to learn who sent it to me and for what purpose."

Penny did not like the idea of accompanying the dancer to Nellie's shop. Having given her promise she saw no way to avoid the unpleasant duty, but she wondered how the girl would receive them.

Leaving Felice behind, Penny and Miss Harmon called a taxi and drove directly to the Marble Doll Shoppe.

"Why do you believe the doll came from this particular place?" the dancer inquired as they drew up in front of the building.

"Because I know the shop uses boxes similar to the one you received. It is an exclusive style."

Miss Harmon and Penny entered the shop. The show room was even more dirty and untidy than upon the girl's last visit. From the back room, a bent old woman hobbled out to greet them.

"Good morning, good morning," she cackled, "what may I do for you this bright morning?"

"Is Nellie here?" asked Penny.

"Nellie went to deliver some packages," replied old Mrs. Farmer. "May I show you some of my pretty dolls?"

Miss Harmon unwrapped the package she had brought with her. The witch doll dropped on the glass counter in front of the old woman.

"Dear me, dear me, what have we here?"

"Someone sent me this doll," Miss Harmon said, "and from the wrapping I had reason to believe that it came from your shop."

"Oh, no," denied Mrs. Farmer, "we don't make dolls like that here."

"I think Nellie might know about it," said Penny. "You may see for yourself that the box is the same type she has used here for many months."

Mrs. Farmer kept shaking her head in a bird-like way.

"We make only pretty dolls in our shop."

By this time, Miss Harmon had lost patience.

"Well, it's no great matter either way," she said with a shrug. "Wherever the doll came from, I don't care for it. I'll just leave it here with you. Perhaps you can sell it."

Mrs. Farmer's lips drew into a grimace intended for a smile.

"Oh, no, dearie," she said in silken tones, "I could not possibly take the doll."

"But I am giving it to you," protested Miss Harmon.

Mrs. Farmer's head bobbed back and forth in vigorous denial.

"The doll has an evil look," she murmured. "I would not keep it in my shop lest it bring misfortune. You must take it with you, dearie."

And with a sound in her throat, suspiciously like a chuckle, the old woman picked up the witch doll and thrust it into Miss Harmon's unwilling hands.

CHAPTER

11

MORE OF THE WITCH DOLL

MISS HARMON ruefully accepted the doll and retreated with Penny to the taxi cab. There she gave way to her pent up feelings.

"It is just as the message warned," she murmured. "The witch doll is a thing of evil, and it cannot be given away!"

"Oh, I'd not take Mrs. Farmer seriously," Penny replied, chagrined because she had failed to prove that the doll came from the Marble Shoppe. "She's peculiar to say the least. I imagine the witch doll was sent to you by Nellie, the former owner of the place. Though why she would do such a thing, I can't guess."

"I have a feeling that bad luck will follow me wherever I go," Miss Harmon insisted. "Felice was right. I never should have kept the doll."

The dancer was so overwrought that Penny tried to think of something reassuring to say. She shared her father's belief that it was ridiculous to attribute super-

natural powers to the witch doll, yet she felt a sincere sympathy for Miss Harmon.

"If you really are determined to rid yourself of that silly witch, it can be done easily," she said, leaning back against the cushions.

"I wish I might never see it again."

The taxi cab was rolling over a high, arching steel bridge. Penny opened the window of the car.

"Here's the end of your witch doll," she laughed, and hurled the box over the railing of the bridge. "A grave in the river."

Miss Harmon settled back against the car cushion, her face relaxing.

"I feel better already," she declared.

"That's because the spell is broken," Penny said lightly.

"Do you suppose I really am rid of that horrid doll?"

Penny gave her a queer look. "Yes, I'm sure you are, Miss Harmon."

The taxi motored on toward the theatre. Recalling that she had a "story" to file at the newspaper office, Penny requested that she be dropped off at the *Star* building. Miss Harmon gave her hand a firm pressure as she said goodbye.

Penny entered her father's private office. Mr. Parker stood by the window, gazing down on the street, but

he turned quickly as his daughter helped herself to his desk and typewriter.

"Did you get a story, Penny?" he inquired.

"Oh, I learned a little." Penny deftly rolled a clean sheet of paper into the typewriter. "Miss Harmon seemed rather hazy on her facts. I still think Felice may know something about that missing necklace."

"Well, write up what you have, Penny. And by the way, the reporters' room is just outside."

"Not for this little reporter," Penny chuckled. "I like your nice padded chair, Dad. Let me know if you need it."

Mr. Parker threw up his hands in a gesture of pretended despair. He secretly considered himself pathetically indulgent with his daughter, but there existed between them a rare comradeship. And Penny's flippant remarks were never meant to be disrespectful.

While the newspaper owner absented himself from the room to consult with the city editor, the girl set to work on her story. She had finished it before Mr. Parker returned.

"Not bad, not bad at all," her father commented, reading the article. "But this witch doll paragraph will have to come out."

"I figured you'd blue pencil it," Penny sighed. "That's why I put it in at the end. It's the most interesting part of all too."

"No witch dolls for the *Star*."

"Someday you may change your mind about that," Penny declared, little guessing the truth of her own words.

Mr. Parker made a few corrections on the story, and handing the sheet back to his daughter, told her to take it out to the editorial room. She went past the "slot" at the big circular desk where the telegraph editor was writing headlines, and speared the story on the sharp spindle by the city editor's elbow.

"So you've joined the staff, Miss Parker?" he inquired, glancing up.

"Well, not exactly," replied Penny. She was a little uneasy in Mr. Dewitt's presence, but for that matter, so was everyone in the office. "I just dashed off this masterpiece in a spare moment."

The city editor did not smile. He never smiled. But the corners of his mouth twitched ever so slightly as the girl retreated.

Feeling very well satisfied with her morning's work, Penny took herself home. Mrs. Weems had finished cleaning the house from cellar to attic, and was just removing a pie from the oven.

"Penny, would you mind if I have luncheon early today?" she inquired.

"Why, no, Mrs. Weems. You needn't bother at all

so far as I'm concerned. I can get something for myself."

"Oh, I shall prepare luncheon the same as always," the housekeeper insisted. "But I'd like to get away from the house early. This is my day off and I have an appointment."

Mrs. Weems spoke in such a self-conscious manner that Penny shot her a curious glance.

"You're not by any chance paying the Great Osandra another visit?" she inquired.

"Well, yes, I am," Mrs. Weems admitted, flushing. "I didn't intend to speak of it, because I knew you would laugh. At first I believed as you do that Mr. Osandra was a faker."

"And now you have changed your mind?"

"Yes, each time I go there he makes new and amazing revelations. The man is really marvelous, Penny."

"Does he have many customers?"

"More persons are coming to him every day."

"Jeanie's father for one," Penny remarked.

"Who do you mean, Penny?"

"Oh, a working man who lives down on the River road. Louise tells me he spends all his money with Osandra while his family is in dire poverty."

"Osandra surely can't know of the situation," Mrs. Weems declared. "I am certain he is a good, kind man. However, I must admit some of the persons who

come to his place have the appearance of being unable to pay a fee."

"How much does Osandra charge?"

"Two dollars for an afternoon seance. Three in the evening."

"The departed spirits must have a union!" Penny chuckled. "Higher wages for night work!"

"Penny, you are simply impossible!" Mrs. Weems protested. "I don't begrudge Osandra his fee."

"Perhaps I shouldn't criticise Mr. Osandra without seeing him in action. I imagine it would be interesting to attend a seance."

"Oh, it is!"

Penny's eyebrows twisted into a frown as she mentally subtracted two dollars from her weekly allowance. If she visited the Great Osandra, it meant that she would be in financial difficulties until next collection day. Nevertheless, she was sorely tempted.

"I might go along with you, Mrs. Weems," she hinted. "That is, if you invite me."

"Why, you know I'd be only too glad to take you, Penny—if you think your father wouldn't object."

"Oh, he would approve, because this visit will be in the interest of science!"

Mrs. Weems regarded Penny a trifle suspiciously. "I don't know what you mean by that remark," she said. "I hope you don't plan upon going there to create

any disturbance. I shouldn't care to take you in that case."

"I promise you I'll be a model of good deportment, Mrs. Weems. My intentions are strictly honorable."

"I trust so, Penny, but I don't like that twinkle in your eye. Sometimes your sense of humor rather gets the better of you."

"I'll keep it under lock and key this time," Penny promised again. "I assure you I'll be as still as a little mouse, and not even wiggle those offensive eyes of mine."

"Oh, all right," laughed Mrs. Weems. "We'll have luncheon in half an hour and then hurry over to Osandra's."

The meal was quickly served, and Penny helped with the dishes.

"Now I'll run upstairs and slip into my disguise," she told Mrs. Weems.

"Your *what?*" demanded the astonished housekeeper.

"My disguise," repeated Penny. "Osandra might recognize me—I mean, if he should ever see me again."

"Such nonsense," protested Mrs. Weems.

Declaring that it would only take her a minute, Penny ran upstairs. Soon she was back wearing a long gray coat and a large green hat which partially hid

her face. Mrs. Weems immediately recognized an outfit which she had discarded two years before.

"I hope you don't mind," said Penny.

"No, you're welcome to the clothes," replied the housekeeper. "But I can't for the life of me see why you wear them. They make you look years older."

She gathered up her purse and gloves, and prepared to lock the doors. Just at that moment the telephone rang.

"Oh, dear me," sighed Mrs. Weems, "someone always calls when one is in a hurry."

"I'll answer it."

Penny ran to the telephone desk and took up the receiver.

"I wish to speak with Miss Parker," said an agitated voice.

"Speaking."

"This is Miss Harmon. I'm terribly upset—a dreadful thing has happened."

"Why, what is it?"

"That witch doll—it came back."

"But I threw it into the river," Penny protested. "How could—"

"When I stepped into my dressing room only a moment ago, there it was on my table the same as before! Oh, the warning has come true! I am under that doll's evil spell!" Miss Harmon's voice rose to an excited pitch.

"There must be some mistake," Penny said soothingly. "I'll come over and talk with you as soon as I can—"

She did not finish, for the click of the receiver told her that the hysterical young woman had left the telephone.

CHAPTER

12

A VOICE IN THE DARK

PENNY'S FACE was grave as she returned to the living room where Mrs. Weems awaited her. Miss Harmon's message baffled her completely. She was sorry the young woman had hung up the receiver without giving full details of the witch doll's mysterious reappearance.

"The doll *couldn't* have come back," Penny muttered. "I don't believe in such things!"

"What are you saying?" inquired the housekeeper. "Was the call for me, Penny?"

"No, it was from Miss Harmon. I'll run over and see her as soon as I can."

"Then you'll not go with me to Osandra's?"

"Well—" Penny did not wish to give up the trip. "I guess I can run over to the theatre after we get back. There's no particular hurry."

Mrs. Weems locked the doors and they went down the street together. As they drew near the building on

Clark Street, Penny remarked uneasily that she hoped Osandra would not mistake her for a reporter.

"And why should he?" asked Mrs. Weems. "Such notions as you do have!"

Penny kept well behind the housekeeper as they went up the stairway to Osandra's "waiting room." Several persons were there ahead of them, seated around the walls in uncomfortable, straight-back chairs. Penny noticed one man, dressed in rough, soiled clothing, and wondered if he might be Jeanie's father. There were two girls, obviously housemaids, who whispered and giggled, as well as three older women who appeared to come from well-to-do families.

Penny and Mrs. Weems seated themselves, but did not have long to wait. Exactly at the stroke of two, the little window in the wall swung open. A man with a hideous, scarred face, peered out at the assembly.

"Surely, he isn't Osandra," Penny whispered.

"No, his assistant," Mrs. Weems informed.

After studying the group for a moment, the man pressed a button and an unseen door opened.

"Enter," he commanded. "Have your fee ready, please."

Everyone rose and filed into the next room. Penny, the last person to pass through the door, turned to stare at Osandra's assistant. She received an unpleasant shock. He was a dwarfish man of about fifty with a

pronounced hump. Seeing his intense gaze fastened upon her, Penny looked quickly away.

The girl found herself in a gloomy chamber which had been draped with black velvet. The windows were covered with the same heavy material, and even the ceiling was black, decorated with a sprinkling of misshapen silver stars.

"Nice and spooky," Penny whispered.

In the center of the room stood a large circular table with eight empty chairs. The ninth chair, directly in front of an object not unlike a black throne, was occupied by The Great Osandra. He was the same man Penny had met before, but he appeared far more impressive in his dark velvet robes.

With a majectic gesture, Osandra waved everyone into chairs.

"Join hands so that our connection with the spirits in the world beyond may not be broken," he commanded in a sepulchral voice.

Penny slipped into a chair beside Mrs. Weems and clasped the hand of her neighbor to the left. She stole a quick glance at the persons about the big round table. Everyone looked grimly serious, every eye was focused upon the medium. Penny resisted an impulse to giggle.

As Osandra gazed sharply at her, she ducked her head lest she be recognized.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," said the medium, "to prove that I use no tricks or mechanical devices, I shall ask my assistant to bind my hands and feet. "Spider!"

"Yes, Master."

The hunchback padded softly across the room to Osandra's throne chair. Deftly he bound the man with stout cords.

Penny watched in fascination. Suddenly, without knowing exactly why, she felt a great distaste for the entire scene. She had come to Osandra's establishment more for a lark than because of any other reason. Now she no longer had zest for the adventure. There was a repulsive quality about the hunchback which sent the shivers down her spine.

She shook off the feeling as the girl at her left said in a hushed voice:

"Please, Osandra, may I speak with my departed brother, Frank?"

"I will try to get through to him," murmured the medium. "We will all concentrate very hard upon Frank. Lights, Spider!"

"Yes, Master."

The hunchback padded away. Turning slightly in her chair, Penny saw him move through the exit and close the door behind him. Evidently in the outside room there was a board which controlled the illumination. In a moment the room was dark.

"Oh, Spirit of the nether world," Osandra intoned. "I summon you—I summon you."

Penny could feel Mrs. Weems' hand trembling in her own, and the girl to her left was shaking as if from the ague. She felt none too comfortable herself.

Although it was mid-day, not a gleam of light filtered into the black shrouded room. Penny was unable to see an inch before her. Everything was still, so quiet that she could hear the uneven breathing of those who sat with her about the circular table.

Unexpectedly, there was a gentle tapping sound so close to Penny that she jumped. The knocking came from the table.

"Are you there, Frank?" called Osandra softly. His voice was dying away, as if the man were fast slipping into a trance.

The raps were repeated three times, and then the room became quiet once more.

"Have you a message for your sister, Frank?" urged the medium. "Try to get through to us. We are ready."

His last words were spoken with a hint of impatience, and it instantly occurred to Penny that Osandra was waiting for his assistant to provide the requested "message."

For a long moment there was no response to the medium's appeal. And then suddenly, a great voice filled the room, a snarling voice pregnant with hatred.

The words boomed out, seeming to come from the throne directly behind medium.

"Melvin Osandra—beware! Your hour will come next!"

There was an indistinct, choking sound, and then silence.

"That wasn't Frank's voice!" screamed the girl at Penny's left. "Turn on the lights! Turn on the lights!"

Panic swept the little group. Chairs were pushed back, some were overturned. Women began to scream. And strangely, Osandra's voice did not arise to quiet their fears.

Penny groped her way to the wall, but she could not locate the exit or the panel which controlled the electric lights.

"Spider!" she called.

Seemingly Osandra's assistant had disappeared from the outer room.

Locating a window, Penny jerked off a long fold of black velvet which screened it. She pushed up the sash and opened the shutters. As a beam of sunlight filtered into the dark room, a gasp of horror escaped the little group.

Melvin Osandra, his feet and hands still bound, lay face downward on the circular table.

CHAPTER

13

THE MEDIUM'S CONFESSION

"THE MAN is dead!" shrieked one of the hysterical women. "Osandra has been killed by a spirit!"

Recovering from her first shock at sight of the inert figure, Penny moved quickly to the medium's side. She touched his hand. Relief surged over her for it was warm.

"Osandra has merely fainted," she cried. "Give me a knife, someone, so that I can cut his cords."

One of the men handed her his pocketknife. She slashed the thongs which bound Osandra's hands and feet. The medium stirred.

"That voice—" he muttered, and a shudder went over his voice.

"He's coming around now," said Penny. "Will you see if you can find some water, Mrs. Weems? And what has become of that man called Spider?"

Even as she spoke, the room was flooded with electric light. The hunchback padded into the room. Penny

gazed at him sharply, wondering where he had been when his presence was so sorely needed.

"Your master has fainted," she said. "Can you get us some water?"

The hunchback stared at the slumped figure on the table, and then, without a word, retreated. He came back a moment later with a glass of water. Penny pressed it to Osandra's lips. The dwarf remained close by, watching as his master took a few sips.

"Didn't you hear us call for the lights to be turned on?" asked Penny.

The hunchback stared at her in a stupid way and did not reply. However, when Mrs. Weems spoke of sending for a doctor he said harshly:

"No! Master would not like that."

By this time only Mrs. Weems, Penny, and one other woman remained in the room, for the others, frightened half out of their wits by the terrifying events, had fled to the street.

Osandra ran a hand across his eyes as if trying to brush away the vision which haunted him. His gaze rested fixedly upon the dwarf.

"Spider," he said in a half whisper, "that voice—did you hear it?"

"Yes, Master."

"Then it was not you who cried out my name?"

"Oh, no, Master. I heard the voice say that your

hour would come. I was frightened. I ran away and hid."

"What was the significance of those words?" inquired Penny.

A convulsive shudder wracked Melvin Osandra's body.

"I do not know," he answered. "In all my years as a medium, nothing like it ever happened before. The voice may have come from the beyond!"

"But why should that prove so terrifying?" asked Penny. "Aren't you accustomed to conversing daily with the spirits?"

"Not with spirits who shout threats," Osandra said sullenly.

"In other words, until today you have practiced a bit of trickery," Penny suggested. "When a voice really spoke, you were shocked because you weren't expecting it."

Osandra's silence was a confession of guilt.

Mrs. Weems stared at him indignantly.

"Well, of all things!" she exclaimed. "To think that I'd be taken in by a cheap faker! Here you've been accepting hard earned money from honest people, and pretending that you were in contact with the spirits!"

"I am not a cheap faker," Osandra denied angrily. "If you spread that story around the neighborhood I'll be ruined! No one will visit my establishment again."

"And it would serve you right," Mrs. Weems declared. "I'm sure you'll get no more of my money."

Osandra buried his head in his hands, looking so sick and miserable that Penny began to feel sorry for him.

"Don't expose me," he pleaded. "This is the only way I have of earning my living. I've only resorted to tricks such as all mediums use."

"Tell us what they are and we may be lenient," Penny urged.

"My assistant, Spider, helps me. I move the table and tap on it by means of a mechanical device in the cabinet back of my chair. I try to learn facts about my clients and tell them what they wish to hear. That is all."

"And that mysterious voice?"

"I tell you, I can't explain it," Osandra insisted. "It was like a warning from the dead."

"Do you believe in the supernatural, Mr. Osandra?" Penny questioned.

"No, at least I never did until today. But that voice was a great shock to me. It sounded for all the world like—"

"Like what?" Penny prompted as the man hesitated.

Osandra shook his head. He realized that he had revealed far too much. Suddenly he gazed at Penny with suspicion.

"Aren't you that same girl who came here the other day?" he demanded. "The reporter?"

"Penny isn't a reporter," declared Mrs. Weems.

Osandra sank back in the chair, closing his eyes. He looked pale and tired.

"I'd have sworn—but then, I'm not myself today. I'm going to my room and rest. I beg of you, don't repeat what I have told you or I shall be ruined."

"We might keep your secret upon one condition," Penny bargained.

"What is that?"

"Do you recall a man by the name of Slocer who comes here?"

"Yes."

"He is a poor man and cannot afford to waste his money. Do not allow him to come here again."

"I'll do as you ask," Osandra promised. "And now please leave me alone. My nerves are shattered."

As Penny and Mrs. Weems went down the long stairway to the street, the housekeeper declared again that she did not understand how she could have been taken in by a person of Osandra's character.

"I hope you'll say nothing of it to your father," she said uneasily. "Not that I wish you to keep secrets from him. But I have acted foolishly."

"Oh, I don't wonder you were taken in by the man," Penny answered. "For just a moment when those lights went out I was under his spell myself. Didn't that old hunchback give you the shivers?"

"I scarcely noticed him."

"You didn't? It seemed to me that his eyes followed me wherever I went. I couldn't help wondering whether he had something to do with that mysterious voice."

"Why would he call out a threat to his own employer?" Mrs. Weems asked in bewilderment. "Such a thing isn't likely, Penny. Besides, it was not his voice."

"No, that's true. Upon second thought I guess Spider couldn't have had anything to do with it. Just the same it was weird. And poor Osandra was frightened out of his wits."

"So was I. I declare, this has taught me a severe lesson."

Penny and the housekeeper had reached the foot of the stairway. Rounding a corner of the hall, they came face to face with a young woman who had just entered the building. She wore a dark veil over her hat, but at such close range, her features were plainly visible.

Penny stopped short. The new arrival was Helene Harmon.

"Why, Miss Harmon!" she exclaimed in astonishment. "I certainly didn't expect to meet you here!"

CHAPTER

14

DISTURBING NEWS

HELENE HARMON could not hide a look of dismay as she recognized Penny.

"Well, I scarcely expected to meet you so soon either," she laughed self consciously. "I—I came here trying to find a dentist."

"I'm afraid you're in the wrong building and the wrong street," replied Penny. "There are no dentists in this neighborhood."

"The lower floor of this building is vacant," explained Mrs. Weems. "Osandra occupies the rooms above."

"Just at the moment I doubt that The Great Osandra would be in a mood to receive visitors," Penny added with a chuckle. "But then, I don't suppose you're interested in seeing him either."

"No—no, of course not," the dancer stammered.

"Is your tooth paining you a great deal?" inquired Mrs. Weems sympathetically. "I know a very good dentist on Glenmore Avenue."

"The pain has let up since I left the theatre. Perhaps I'll not bother today."

Miss Harmon was so ill at ease that Penny wondered if she had intended to visit a dentist at all. She firmly believed that the dancer had meant to call upon the medium.

Reluctantly, the young woman turned away from the stairs.

"I had planned to run over to the theatre and see you this afternoon," Penny remarked, as the three walked along together. "You said over the telephone that the witch doll had been returned. Tell me all about it."

"There is absolutely nothing more to tell. After we threw the doll in the river, I returned to my hotel. Later when I went to the theatre, the witch doll was lying on my dresser."

"The very same doll?"

"Yes, it's uncanny."

"I've heard of queer things, but never anything like that," Penny declared. "How could that doll have been recovered from the river and delivered back to you? It just isn't possible."

"I can show you the doll."

"Did you ask the doorman if he had seen anyone enter your dressing room?"

"Yes, and you know I keep the room locked. Since

my necklace disappeared, I do not take any chances."

"Does your maid have a key?"

"No," Miss Harmon answered. "Upon occasion I have given it to her, however."

"Then I suppose she knows where you keep it?"

"I imagine she does, but Felice could not be responsible for the witch doll appearing in my room. No *person* could have accomplished such a thing."

"If you are suggesting that magical forces have been at work, I am afraid I can't agree," Penny smiled. "I'd toss that silly doll out the window again and forget it."

"Easily said, but not so easily accomplished. Miss Parker, I worry constantly. Last night I couldn't sleep a wink. I feel as if I were under an evil spell."

Penny relapsed into a meditative silence. She did not wonder that the dancer was disturbed by the recent happenings. In reviewing the events which had occurred since the witch doll came into the young woman's possession, it would be natural for a superstitious person to attribute them to supernatural causes.

"Either someone is playing a cruel hoax upon her," Penny reflected, "or sinister forces are at work."

She thought of Nellie and her frown deepened. Where did the former owner of the doll shop fit into the picture? The puzzle seemed too involved for anyone to solve.

Presently, Penny inquired if the police were making progress in tracing Miss Harmon's missing necklace.

"Not the slightest so far as I can tell," replied the dancer. "I wish now I never had reported my loss. They have bothered me with so many annoying questions."

"Still, I imagine it would be worth it if the necklace were returned."

Miss Harmon nodded in agreement, and at the next corner parted with her friends, remarking that she would take a taxi back to the theatre.

"I wish I knew if she really intends to return there," Penny speculated as she walked toward home with Mrs. Weems. "My guess is that she will go straight to see that man Osandra."

"We should have warned her that he is a fraud," declared the housekeeper with a toss of her head.

Penny was so tempted to learn if the young woman had taken the taxi, that despite Mrs. Weems' strenuous protests, she retraced her steps to the corner. She arrived in time to see Miss Harmon disappearing into the building which sheltered Osandra's seance establishment.

"Just as I thought!" Penny told herself. "Well, at least she might have been more honest about it."

The girl returned home, aware that Miss Harmon had meant to deceive her. For the first time it occurred

to her to wonder if the young woman had made other misrepresentations. That evening at the dinner table, Penny's father voiced a similar thought.

"If I were you," he said, "I'd be cautious in my friendship with Miss Harmon."

Penny glanced up in surprise.

"Why, Dad? Have you learned anything about her?"

"I was talking with the agent for the Furness Insurance Company today."

"Is that the company which holds the policy on Miss Harmon's necklace."

"Yes, payment of the claim is being held up pending a complete investigation."

"You mean that the insurance officials doubt that the necklace was stolen?" Penny asked in amazement.

"The case has some strange angles. For instance, Miss Harmon told the police she lost the diamonds at the Black Cat, or at least that she discovered the necklace was missing immediately after she left the night club."

"Yes, her details were quite vague."

"Exactly, Penny. When questioned by the police she became rather twisted in her story. First she said that she had visited the Black Cat somewhere around midnight. Then she couldn't be certain what time it was. Likewise she was vague as to her escort, and

finally she said that she had gone there by herself."

"But I thought one could not be admitted to the Black Cat without an escort," Penny commented.

"The club does have such a ruling. Miss Harmon slipped up on that point. Naturally, the police were suspicious. They checked on her story. Not a waiter at the Black Cat could recall having seen the young woman there on the evening she claimed."

"Then the police believe that she lied?"

"Yes, I'm telling you this in strict confidence, Penny. So far Miss Harmon does not suspect that her story has been questioned."

"What will be the outcome?"

"Well, if the police are able to prove that the young woman deliberately disposed of the necklace in order to collect insurance money, she may be arrested for fraud."

"I know for a fact that Miss Harmon isn't very truthful," Penny said slowly, "but I can't believe she would try to cheat the insurance company. For one thing, the necklace wasn't insured for its full value."

"Perhaps it was," replied Mr. Parker. "You and I have no way of knowing its true worth. However, I am inclined to agree with you that Miss Harmon doesn't appear the type who would attempt a trick like that. And there is another angle which developed today."

"What is that, Dad?"

"I received an anonymous note. As a rule I throw such letters in the scrap basket, but this one interested me."

Mr. Parker removed a folded brown paper from his vest pocket and offered it to Penny for her inspection. She read:

"Editor, *Riverview Star:*

If you want a straight tip on what became of Miss Helene Harmon's diamond necklace ask Melvin Osandra."

"I checked on the name," Mr. Parker revealed. "It seems the man is a medium."

"Yes," Penny agreed in a strained voice. She was staring at the message.

"Probably the tip means absolutely nothing. It may have been written by a misguided person who is under the impression this man Osandra can read the stars and tell the name of the culprit."

"Dad, there is something decidedly familiar about this handwriting," Penny said. "I'd say it had been written by the same person who sent Miss Harmon a warning about the witch doll's evil spell."

"Nellie Marble?" asked Mr. Parker, smiling.

"No, Dad. This isn't Nellie's writing."

Mr. Parker reached to take the note from his daugh-

ter's hand. "Well, in any case, I guess there is nothing to the clue. I'll burn this up."

Penny hesitated and then said with a strange intensity:

"Dad, I'd keep the letter. I believe there may be something in it."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning just this, Dad," Penny answered impressively. "I know for a fact that Miss Harmon has visited Osandra's seance parlor. I'd not be very much surprised if that man knew something about those missing jewels!"

CHAPTER

15

A LURKING FIGURE

WITHOUT MENTIONING Mrs. Weems' name, Penny spoke of her meeting with Miss Harmon, and revealed all that had transpired at Melvin Osandra's establishment. She was pleased to observe that her father appeared impressed by the story.

"You never should have gone to such a place," he scolded. "Since you did, I'm glad you used your eyes. Penny, your information may be valuable to the police."

"I suppose they're welcome to it, Dad, only I hate to get Miss Harmon into trouble. Melvin Osandra is rather bogged down in misery right now too."

"One's sympathies should never be permitted to interfere with justice," said Mr. Parker. He arose and searched for his hat.

"Are you on your way to the police station now?"

"Yes, I'll turn this note over to them. Then they may do as they please about Osandra."

After her father had departed, Penny was left alone,

for Mrs. Weems had gone to the home of a neighbor. The hour was early, the streets not yet dark. Feeling the need of companionship, she walked over to the Sidell house, but Louise and her parents were not there.

Penny wandered aimlessly toward the outskirts of Riverview, enjoying the pleasant evening air. She drew near the Marble Doll Shoppe, and observed that a light was burning in the rear room. This did not surprise her for she knew that Nellie lived in the shop, cooking her meals and sleeping there to save house rent.

"I'd drop in and see her if she hadn't been so unfriendly," Penny thought.

She walked a few steps past the shop only to pause. Nellie hadn't meant to be rude, she convinced herself. Perhaps the girl had a sound reason back of her strange actions. Rather than take an offended attitude might it not be better to try to talk with Nellie again, encouraging her to discuss the mysterious witch doll?

Impulsively, Penny retraced her steps and knocked on the door of the shop. She waited several minutes, and when there was no answer, started to turn away. Just then she heard footsteps. The door was cautiously opened.

"Well, what do you want here at this hour?" asked Mrs. Farmer.

"I came to see Nellie."

The door opened wider.

"So it's you again!" the old woman exclaimed, peering at her. "Nellie isn't here as you very well know. You were responsible for getting her to run away!"

"I don't know what you mean!" gasped Penny. "Nellie isn't working for you any more?"

"Don't pretend you don't know about it," the old woman accused. "You came here and talked her into leaving me."

"Pardon me for contradicting you, Mrs. Farmer. I did not influence Nellie in any way."

"She skipped out late yesterday without taking all her things. Told me she was on her way to do an errand. The little snip never came back, but when I lay hands on her—"

"After all, Nellie had a perfect right to leave your employment, didn't she?" asked Penny. "I fear you failed to make her work attractive."

Mrs. Farmer's eyes snapped like brands of fire. She was very angry.

"I'll get her back—and when I do—"

"Slavery went out of vogue directly after the Civil War," said Penny. "I don't blame Nellie for leaving you. I'd do the same myself."

"Oh, you would?" snarled the old woman, fairly beside herself with rage. "Let me tell you something, young lady. Don't ever come around here again!"

With deliberate and cruel design, she slammed the

screen door so that it caught Penny's hand. As the girl cried out in pain, she laughed gleefully and retreated into the dark depths of the shop.

"Why, that old cat!" Penny muttered, nursing her injured fingers. "It's a good thing I have a forgiving disposition or I might heave a rock through her plate glass window!"

Ordinarily, she was not a person to cherish bitter feelings, but never in her life had she met such a disagreeable character as old Mrs. Farmer.

"Nellie had good reason to run away," she thought. "She must have been actually afraid of that old woman or she would have told her she intended to leave the shop."

Penny soon forgot her childish desire to "get even" with Mrs. Farmer, and the next day even laughed about the incident as she reported it to Louise.

"Why, I never heard of such a mean thing to do!" Louise cried sympathetically. "I shall tell all my friends never to buy another doll at the shop!"

"Speaking of dolls, Lou, have you seen Jeanie lately?"

"No, I was hoping you might like to run out there today. We could take a picnic lunch with us and make an outing of it."

"Sounds interesting," agreed Penny instantly, "only how will we get there? The Leaping Lena's gas tank

is bone dry. The last time I siphoned some out of Dad's car he was fit to be tied!"

"Penny, you haven't spent all your allowance again?"

"I'm down to twenty-eight cents. Osandra took two dollars away from me."

"Maybe I could borrow our car," Louise said hopefully. "I'll run home and see. You might start making sandwiches."

In a few minutes she telephoned to say that her mother had agreed they might use the Sidell auto for their picnic. Penny set to work packing a hamper with good things to eat. Mrs. Weems, learning of the girls' destination, insisted upon adding an extra pie and a large cake for the Slocer family.

Louise, laden with a heavy basket of her own, drove up to the door shortly after eleven o'clock.

"We have enough food for a dozen persons," she laughed when she saw Penny's contribution. "We'll give anything we have left to the Slocers."

"Why not take Jeanie with us on the picnic?" proposed Penny. "She doesn't have many outings."

"Yes, she'd love it."

They found the little girl playing in the yard at the Slocer cottage. She ran for her mother, a thin, tired-looking woman, who came out to thank the girls for their gifts.

"We have had such a hard time," she said, tears in her eyes. "However, I was saying only this morning that since Jeanie met you, our luck seems to have changed. My husband is straightening up. He brings his money home now instead of squandering it at Osandra's wretched place."

"I am glad to hear that," Penny said with a perfectly straight face. She did not reveal her own bargain with the medium.

Mrs. Slocer agreed that Jeanie might go with the girls for a picnic luncheon. She declined an invitation herself, saying that she had a big washing to get out on the line.

"Do you know of a nice picnic spot, Jeanie?" Louise asked the little girl.

"Oh, yes, there's a real pretty place down by the river."

"Then you lead the way, Jeanie."

Soon they had the luncheon cloth spread out in a pleasant site along the river bank. The little girl had never eaten olives before nor had she tasted potato chips and various other articles of food which Penny and Louise accepted as picnic necessities. It did them good to see how heartily the child ate.

After the dishes had been cleared away, Penny and Louise took Jeanie for a walk through the woods and helped her gather a bouquet of wild flowers to carry

home. Coming to a long, curling grape vine which hung from a tall tree, Penny declared that it would make a wonderful swing.

She caught a firm hold, and with a little run and a jump, floated out into space, singing gaily, "Like the man on the flying trapeze, I sail through the air with the greatest of ease."

"Oh, let me try it!" Jeanie pleaded, clapping her hands in delight.

"All right," laughed Penny, jumping lightly to the ground. "Hold fast and I'll give you a big push."

She sent the child flying high into the air. Jeanie screamed with pleasure.

"Now you swing with me, Penny," she cried.

"The grape vine might break with both of you," Louise warned.

"Oh, it's big and tough," Penny laughed. "Anyway, we won't have far to fall."

She started to take her place beside Jeanie, but suddenly seemed to change her mind. She was staring toward the river. The smile had left her face.

"What is the matter?" demanded Jeanie. "Don't you want to swing any more?"

Penny did not answer the question. Instead, she said to Louise in a tense undertone:

"Look over toward those bushes to the right. Someone is spying on us!"

CHAPTER

16

SUSPICION

FROM THE dense clump of bushes only a short distance away, a pair of wicked looking eyes peered forth at the girls. The indistinct outline of a man's body was visible, but they could not see him clearly enough to note his features.

"Let's get away from here quickly," Louise whispered, clutching Jeanie's hand.

"No, I have a better idea!" Penny said in an undertone. Aloud she cried: "Yes, Jeanie, I'll swing again! Watch this!"

She seized the grape vine, and with a mighty run, swung herself straight toward the clump of bushes. Suddenly releasing her hold, she dropped practically in the lap of the man who had hidden himself there.

Louise and Jeanie heard a shout of rage, and then they saw a man in a black suit and felt hat scramble from the bushes and run toward the river. Penny pursued him for a short distance, but came back as Louise called frantically to her.

"My, that was funny!" Penny laughed. "He ran like a scared rabbit. Did you get a good look at him, Louise?"

"No, he kept his hand over his face."

"I didn't really see him either."

"Why should anyone wish to spy upon us, Penny?"

"I'm sure I don't know. Anyway, he's gone now, and I doubt if he'll come back in a hurry."

"Suppose we get away from here ourselves," Louise urged.

Penny remained in a thoughtful mood as they gathered up the picnic hampers. The man who had spied upon them had appeared too well dressed to be a tramp. She was sorry she had failed to see his face clearly. In running away he had kept his head low, almost as if he had feared recognition.

Walking back to the Slocer cottage, the girls took leave of Jeanie and her mother, and returned to their own homes.

As she came up on the porch, Penny was surprised to find Mrs. Weems waiting for her at the door.

"Miss Harmon telephoned while you were away," the housekeeper told her. "She requested that you visit her at the theatre just as soon as possible."

Penny frowned thoughtfully. "I'm not very anxious to go over, but I suppose I should. How long ago did she call?"

"About half an hour."

Penny changed into a clean frock, and then with some misgiving, presented herself at the theatre. Felice admitted her to Miss Harmon's dressing room.

"Good afternoon," said Penny politely. "Mrs. Weems said you wished to see me."

"Yes," the dancer replied, offering the girl a chair. "I simply had to talk with someone or I would go mad!"

"Has anything new gone wrong?"

"Just about everything. The police are proving so annoying. Then last evening when I was dancing, the heel of my slipper flew off. It was a miracle I didn't trip and fall. During the performance someone deliberately hissed too!"

"You have had your troubles, Miss Harmon. Could it have been that same little man who created a disturbance the night you introduced your witch dance?"

"I shouldn't be surprised. It looked like the same person." Miss Harmon turned to the maid. "Felice, would you run over to the drugstore and get me some postage stamps?"

"Postage stamps?" the girl asked blankly.

"Yes, that is what I said."

Felice took the coin Miss Harmon gave her and went out the door.

"I did that just to be rid of her," the dancer sighed. "She gets on my nerves frightfully."

"Then why don't you discharge her?"

"I dread breaking in a new maid. I shouldn't mind Felice if only she didn't keep me so stirred up about the witch doll. The horrid thing came back again today."

"You mean you tried to dispose of it a second time?" Penny asked.

"Yes, I dropped it in a rubbish can back of the theatre. An hour later, I found it in my dressing room again."

"It seems almost unbelievable."

"Nevertheless, it is true enough. I would give almost anything to be rid of that doll."

Penny was silent for a moment and then she said with a twinkle in her eye: "I think I know how your problem might be solved."

"How?" cried the dancer eagerly.

Before Penny could reveal her plan, there came a knock on the door. In the absence of Felice, Miss Harmon arose to admit the visitor. A large, square-shouldered man in dark blue, stepped into the room.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Cassidy," said the dancer without warmth. "I suppose you came to annoy me with questions again?"

"I hope not," replied the detective. "We're doing our best to trace the necklace for you."

"So far you've accomplished no results. From the

number of times I've been questioned, one might think that I was the chief suspect in the case."

Mr. Cassidy sat down near Penny. Thinking that she might be an intruder, the girl arose to leave.

"Please remain," Miss Harmon requested. "I trust this interview will not take long."

"That depends entirely upon you, Miss," said the detective. "I'll be quite frank. Your story does not satisfy us."

"I don't understand."

"In checking up, we have learned that you never did visit the Black Cat on the night of the twenty-sixth, Miss Harmon. Shall I tell you where you were that evening after the theatre?"

Miss Harmon did not speak. Her hands tightly gripped the chair. A bright flush had spread over her cheeks.

"You went to see a man by the name of Melvin Osandra."

"How ridiculous!"

"We have proof, Miss Harmon. Now I may as well tell you that unless you reveal the truth, we'll be forced to one conclusion—that you secretly disposed of the necklace so that you might collect the insurance."

"Oh, such a thought never entered my mind! Never!" Tears of anger stung the dancer's eyes. She gazed appealingly at Penny.

"Tell me the real story about the necklace," the detective urged.

"It was stolen just as I said."

"But not at the Black Cat?"

"No," Miss Harmon admitted reluctantly, "I lied about that part. I went to Melvin Osandra's establishment, and the necklace disappeared while I was there."

"Why didn't you tell us this in the first place?"

"I—I didn't wish to have it known where I had been. If the story appeared in a newspaper my public might consider me superstitious."

At this naive remark, Penny glanced toward the witch doll reposing on the dancer's dressing table and hid a smile.

"So the necklace was stolen at Osandra's?" the detective mused. "We've had our eye on that fellow for some time."

"Oh, Melvin Osandra didn't steal the necklace!" Miss Harmon cried quickly. "I will vouch for him."

"Personal friend of yours?"

"No, of course not," the dancer stammered.

"Then how can you be certain he had nothing to do with the theft?"

"Because I am sure he is an honest man."

"His line of work scarcely bears that out," Mr. Cassidy said dryly. "I'm afraid we'll have to get out a warrant for Osandra's arrest."

"No, no! Please don't do that."

"Why not, Miss Harmon?"

"Because he had nothing to do with the loss of the necklace," the dancer cried angrily. "Melvin Osandra is as worried over the theft as I am! If you arrest him, his business would be ruined."

"You seem rather concerned over his future."

"Why should I wish to see you destroy an innocent man?" Miss Harmon retorted. "I have told you the truth. My necklace disappeared during a seance at Osandra's, but I prefer to lose the diamonds rather than be subjected to unfavorable publicity."

"I regret we cannot drop this matter until it has been sifted to the bottom."

"I'll answer no more of your questions," Miss Harmon said defiantly.

Mr. Cassidy smiled and arose. "We'll see what develops," he said. "I'll bother you no more for today."

After the detective had gone, Miss Harmon paced nervously up and down.

"The police are stupid!" she cried. "Stupid! What shall I do if they arrest Melvin Osandra?"

"I don't see what can be done," replied Penny calmly. "Are you really certain he did not steal your necklace?"

"Of course I am," replied the dancer in an offended tone. "Let's not talk about it, please. I am so upset.

Tell me your plan for getting rid of the witch doll."

"Well, it may not appeal to you."

"I'll do anything," said Miss Harmon desperately.

"This is my little idea. I'll keep the witch doll for you, but only upon one condition. You must agree not to tell anyone what has become of it."

"That would be an easy condition. But aren't you afraid to take the doll? My bad luck might be visited upon you."

"I'm willing to risk it," Penny smiled. She walked over to the dressing table and picked up the ugly doll, studying it curiously.

"I appreciate this more than I can say," Miss Harmon murmured.

"Don't thank me yet. Wait until I accomplish results. However, I practically can assure you that you won't see *this* witch doll ever again. And don't forget your promise. Tell no one that you gave the doll to me."

"Not even Felice," Miss Harmon agreed.

Penny started for home with her package, decidedly pleased with herself for having gained possession of the mysterious witch doll.

"I'll have plenty of fun with it," she chuckled. "But I sadly fear Mrs. Weems may not be so glad to see this strange doll coming home to roost!"

CHAPTER

17

PENNY'S DISCOVERY

PENNY WAS not mistaken in believing that the housekeeper would look with disfavor upon this latest acquisition, for Mrs. Weems was thoroughly acquainted with the story of the doll's mysterious powers.

"My goodness, I wish you hadn't brought that ugly thing home," she declared. "What will you do with it?"

"Keep it if possible," smiled Penny. "If I fail, my reputation is ruined. The doll must not return to Miss Harmon."

"How could it unless you take it there?"

"Well, this little doll has a way of cutting capers when one's back is turned," said Penny. "But I aim to fool the old witch. I'll not turn my back."

She took the doll and perched it on the fireplace mantel, admiring the effect.

"I can't have it there," declared the housekeeper. "I don't believe I could do my work with that ugly creature staring me in the face."

"Then I'll take it to my room."

Penny ran upstairs, and after due thought, locked the witch doll in a bureau drawer. She tied the key to a string about her neck.

"I'll fight to the death before I'll give it up too," she assured Mrs. Weems.

Later that evening Louise telephoned to ask if she would care to attend a movie.

"Not tonight," said Penny firmly. "I'm working."

"What doing?"

"Watching my bureau drawer!"

"Penny Parker!" Louise exclaimed indignantly. "Have you lost your mind?"

"Not exactly, Lou. Come on over and I'll tell you all about it."

Within ten minutes Louise appeared at the Parker home, and Penny related everything that had occurred at the theatre. Proudly she displayed the witch doll.

"I've had it four hours now," she boasted. "It hasn't even wiggled."

"You may not think it's quite so funny later on," Louise warned darkly. "I know I wouldn't care to keep that thing."

"Oh, Lou, we both realize this doll couldn't have supernatural powers."

"Then what makes it do such crazy things?"

"The answer is, it doesn't. Some *person* is behind it all."

"Do you suspect anyone, Penny?"

"No, not definitely. The case has so many queer angles. For instance, why did Miss Harmon defend Osandra today? She's hiding something, and the police know it too."

"From what you've told me of Osandra, I'd guess he was the one who stole the necklace."

"Miss Harmon doesn't seem to think so. She's a strange person, Lou."

"You may be sorry you tried to help her," Louise warned as she prepared to leave.

At ten o'clock Penny went to bed, but she did not sleep well. It was very easy to imagine that she could hear someone tiptoeing down the hall; every time a board would creak she sat up in bed and listened. Finally she fell into a troubled sleep only to dream that she had turned into a witch herself and was riding through the sky astride her broom. She woke up pounding her pillow.

Penny had just finished her breakfast when Mrs. Weems told her that she was wanted at the telephone.

"I think Miss Harmon is calling."

With no misgivings, Penny went to the phone.

"Is this you, Miss Parker?" the dancer asked in an agitated voice. "Oh, I knew your idea wouldn't work! It's here again!"

"The witch doll?" gasped Penny.

"Yes, I came to the theatre early this morning for a special rehearsal. When I opened my dressing room door, there it was, staring at me!"

"Hold the telephone a minute, please," Penny commanded.

She ran up the stairs to her room two at a time. The bureau drawer was still locked. She fumbled with the key.

"You two-timing old witch doll," she muttered darkly. "If you've betrayed me—"

The doll was still in the drawer exactly where she had left it. In relief, Penny rocked back on her heels and laughed aloud. Then she raced downstairs to the telephone.

"You're mistaken, Miss Harmon," she said. "I still have the witch doll."

"But how could that be? I am sitting right here looking at it now!"

"You're looking at another doll, Miss Harmon. Why, the scheme is as clear as glass! Some one has been substituting witch dolls as fast as you throw them away."

"Who would do such a trick?"

"I don't know—yet. Will you be at the theatre very long?"

"Yes, for several hours."

"I'll come over and talk with you," Penny said.

"Try to get rid of Felice, for what I have to say will be strictly private."

"I'll be waiting for you," the dancer promised.

Mr. Parker offered to take Penny in the car, dropping her off at the theatre on his way to the newspaper office. She suspected from the tolerant way he smiled that he considered her activities slightly amusing.

"Just you wait, Dad," she declared, "I may get a big story yet!"

"I hope you do, Penny," he replied seriously. "There may be more to this affair than I thought at first. For instance, that second robbery at Osandra's doesn't look so good."

"Second robbery?"

"You didn't see the paper this morning?"

"No, I never glanced at it."

"Last evening during a seance at Melvin Osandra's parlors, a wealthy patron lost a valuable wrist watch set with diamonds. She made a protest to the police, demanding the medium's arrest."

"Miss Harmon didn't say a word about it."

"She may not have seen the paper yet. The story developed after I left the office late last night."

"Well, the plot seems to be thickening," Penny commented thoughtfully.

At the next corner she left the car, and entered the theatre. She rapped on the door of the dancer's dressing

room and was told to come in. One glance assured her that the news about Osandra had reached Miss Harmon, for the morning paper was scattered over the table.

"Oh, Miss Parker," the dancer cried before Penny could speak, "that evil spell is still at work! Have you seen this story in the newspaper? There was a robbery last night at Osandra's place, and the woman complained to the police."

"Yes, that was what my father told me."

"Will this mean Osandra's arrest?" Miss Harmon asked tensely.

"Well, I couldn't say. Considering that your necklace disappeared there, I'd judge the police would regard Osandra as a suspect. He'll probably be arrested."

Miss Harmon began to pace the floor as she always did when excited.

"They can't do that!" she stormed. "It's not fair! Osandra had nothing to do with either of the robberies."

"You speak with conviction," Penny said dryly. "How can you be sure he is innocent?"

"Because—" Miss Harmon broke off, "—I can't tell you, but I am certain. Please, Miss Parker, isn't there anything you can do to help? Your father has influence—"

Penny shook her head.

"Not with the police. Miss Harmon, if you really wish me to help, why not tell the truth? You are hiding something."

The dancer avoided Penny's gaze.

"Your story that the diamond necklace was lost at the Black Cat has been discredited," the girl went on. "What really became of your jewels?"

"I told Mr. Cassidy the truth. They were stolen at Osandra's."

"Then I can't understand why you wish to protect the man. I should think you would cooperate with the police. Have you no interest in recovering the necklace?"

"Certainly, but not at the expense of Melvin."

"Melvin?" Penny caught her up quickly.

Miss Harmon's face flushed for she had used the medium's first name quite unintentionally.

"You seem well acquainted with the man," Penny said as the dancer did not speak. "He is an old friend?"

"Well, not exactly," Miss Harmon said uneasily. "Please don't ask me any more."

"Very well," replied Penny, "but in that case you needn't expect me to try to help you. And I really believe that both you and Mr. Osandra may be in need of a friend before this affair has been sifted through."

"I do need a friend," the dancer repeated. "Perhaps I have been unwise to withhold the truth. I did it be-

cause I wished to spare myself publicity. If I should tell you about Melvin Osandra, will you promise never to repeat it?"

"I can't agree to such a condition," Penny answered. "I do promise to help you if I can."

"You've been very kind," Miss Harmon murmured, her head low. "I'll tell you the truth—Melvin Osandra is my brother."

CHAPTER

18

AN ASTONISHING ADMISSION

MISS HARMON'S revelation took Penny by surprise, for it never had occurred to her that the young woman might be related to Melvin Osandra.

"Why have you kept this matter secret?" she asked. "I fail to understand."

"I suppose it sounds very snobbish to say this," replied the dancer. "The truth is that I was ashamed of Melvin's calling. I never approved of him taking up the work he did."

"You believed that it might reflect upon you if it were generally known that your brother was a medium?"

"Yes, Melvin long ago dropped the name of Harmon and called himself The Great Osandra. Until last week we had not seen each other for nearly four years. When our paths crossed here at Riverview I naturally went to see him."

"Of course," agreed Penny.

"One evening when I was at Melvin's place I re-

mained during a seance. Six other persons were there that night, and Melvin wished me to fill in at the table. Not until after the lights were turned on did I discover that my diamond necklace was missing. By that time nearly everyone had left the parlor. Melvin and I searched everywhere for the jewels. Finally we were forced to conclude they had been stolen."

"You should have told the police the true story."

"I realize that now," Miss Harmon agreed. "However, I did not wish it known where I had been, and Melvin was afraid he might lose customers if the public learned about the robbery. We talked it over and decided that it might be best to collect the five thousand dollars insurance, and accept the remainder of the loss."

"As it turned out, neither of you escaped unfavorable publicity."

"Oh, we muddled everything," Miss Harmon acknowledged. "This second robbery at Melvin's place will ruin him. We can't understand it at all."

"Did you know the persons who attended that first seance—I mean the time when your necklace disappeared?"

"No, they were all strangers to me. Melvin tried to make a private investigation, but he's had scant success."

"May I ask you another question? Did your brother tell you about the seance which I attended? A voice

cried out, 'Beware! Your hour will come next, Melvin Osandra!' "

"Yes, he told me," Miss Harmon declared, a look of fear in her eyes. "Melvin could not understand it, and neither can I. It was uncanny—that voice in the darkness."

"Then it wasn't a trick used to startle those who attended the seance?"

"Oh, no," Miss Harmon declared earnestly. "He has gained his effects by certain devices used by many mediums, but this was different. Melvin's nerves were so shattered that he went to bed for a day."

The dancer's words only confirmed Penny's own belief that Osandra had not been play-acting when he had fainted during the seance.

"Tell me, do either you or your brother have any enemies?"

"Why, I suppose everyone has enemies," Miss Harmon replied slowly. "However, save for Melvin, I do not know anyone in this city except the few persons I have met the past week."

"And your brother? Has he lived in Riverview long?"

"Only a few months. He moves about from city to city."

Penny was silent a moment and then she said:

"Miss Harmon, I'll do everything in my power to help you. Don't you think it would be wise to tell the police everything?"

"I dread the publicity."

"You will not escape it in any case. Already the police have discredited your story about being at the Black Cat. They might decide to take you to the police station for questioning."

"Oh, that would be dreadful! Perhaps you are right. I will tell the police the true story, but will they believe me?"

"They should. Your story convinced me," said Penny. "By telling everything you may save your brother from being charged with both robberies."

"Melvin had nothing to do with either of the thefts," Miss Harmon murmured. "He may have fooled people a little, but he never would steal. Certainly not from his own sister."

Penny was inclined to believe in Melvin Osandra's innocence, and for that reason she determined to do everything she could to aid Miss Harmon. Promising that she would discuss the problem with her father, the girl moved toward the door.

"And what of that horrid witch doll?" asked Miss Harmon quickly.

"I've proven to my own satisfaction that the doll has no supernatural power," Penny replied. "It's clear

that some person is responsible for its mysterious reappearances."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I—yet," grinned Penny. "But I have an idea. Just give me a few days, and I may have something important to report."

Leaving the theatre a few minutes later, she walked slowly down the street. Absorbed in her own thoughts, she did not turn her head at the staccato "toot-toot" of an automobile horn. A car drew up at the curbing.

"Hello," called Louise Sidell gaily. "Won't you recognize a friend?"

"Oh, hello, Lou!" Penny exclaimed. "I didn't hear your car sneak up."

"Jump in and I'll give you a lift home. Or better still, why not come along with me?"

"Where?" Penny inquired, sliding into the front seat.

"I'm on my way out to the Slocer cottage. Mrs. Slocer does beautiful mending. Mother sent some clothes for her to fix."

"I'd like to go along only—"

"Oh, you can spare twenty minutes," Louise cut in. "I'll be back easily in that time."

Without giving Penny an opportunity to protest, she drove on toward the river road. The girls carried the garments into the house. While Penny talked with

Jeanie, Louise explained about the work to be done.

"I will have the mending ready in two or three days," Mrs. Slocer promised. "Your mother has been so kind, Louise."

As the girls turned to leave a few minutes later, they both heard a strange scratching sound on the door.

"Did someone knock?" asked Penny.

"It may have been Jeanie's cat scratching to get in," said Mrs. Slocer.

Just then the noise was heard again. She went to open the door. A girl in a tattered dress, her eyes dazed, hands and face scratched by thorns, stood on the porch.

"Please," she murmured in a low voice, "could you give me something to eat? I've had nothing for so long—"

Penny moved quickly to the door. She gave a gasp of horror.

"Nellie Marble!"

The girl stared at her in a vacant sort of way, and would have fallen had not Penny caught her by the arm.

"Don't you recognize me, Nellie? It's Penny—Penny Parker."

"Yes, I know you," the girl acknowledged. "I am

ashamed—" her voice died away as if she had lost the thread of thought.

"Bring her into the house," Mrs. Slocer said quickly. "I will get a bed ready."

Nellie made no protest as Penny and Louise, supporting her between them, half carried her into the cottage. They removed her muddy shoes and stretched her out on the bed.

While Louise brought a basin of warm water and wash cloths, Penny quietly consulted with Mrs. Slocer.

"The girl is a friend of mine," she whispered. "I can't understand how she came to be in such condition, but it's evident she's suffered a great shock. She needs food and rest."

"I'll find something for her to eat," Mrs. Slocer declared. "What should I fix?"

"Do you have plenty of eggs?"

"Yes, and milk."

"Then we might give her a soft boiled egg, toast and milk as a beginning," Penny said. "I'll be glad to prepare it."

By the time the meal was ready, Louise had bathed Nellie's face and hands. They propped the girl up with pillows and encouraged her to eat. At first she scarcely had the strength to hold a spoon, but the food seemed to revive her. Once started, she ate ravenously.

"What in the world happened to you, Nellie?" Louise asked when she could not restrain her curiosity. "You must have been wandering around for days!"

"I have been," the girl admitted. "Ever since I left the doll shop."

"Why didn't you come straight to me?" Penny demanded.

"I don't know—I—I hated to ask for help. Especially when I didn't take your advice."

"You mean about selling your place to Mrs. Farmer?"

"Yes, I made such a horrible mistake."

"You learned that she wasn't a very pleasant sort?"

A shudder wracked Nellie's thin body. "Oh, she is an awful creature—I hated her. Finally I ran away. I didn't even take my clothes—only the ones I had on my back."

"Did Mrs. Farmer pay you for the shop?"

"Pay me?" Nellie laughed hysterically. "Not a penny."

"Well, she can't cheat you like that," said Penny indignantly. "If you fail to get the money, we'll go to law."

"Oh, no! I don't wish to have anything more to do with her. I'd rather lose the shop—everything."

"You are afraid of Mrs. Farmer?" inquired Penny.

"Yes, she is cruel and mean."

"You have absolutely no reason to be afraid of that old woman," Louise declared. "She can be compelled to pay you what she owes or else give up the shop."

"What happened after you ran away?" questioned Penny gravely.

"I can't seem to remember just what did happen. I slept down by the river. It was damp and I caught a dreadful cold. I had nothing to eat and until today I was ashamed to beg. I guess I didn't know exactly what I was doing."

Penny glanced quickly at Louise. Both girls believed that Nellie had suffered a great shock, else she would not be in her present condition.

"Do you feel able to travel in a car?" Penny inquired.

"Travel?"

"Yes, you're coming home with me, Nellie. I have a room all ready for you."

"You are so kind," the girl murmured. "I don't deserve it."

"Nonsense."

"But it is true, Penny. I have hidden certain things from you."

"You refer to the witch doll, perhaps?"

"Yes," Nellie murmured in a low voice. "I couldn't allow you to involve yourself in my troubles—not unless you knew the truth."

"Then suppose you tell me," Penny suggested.

"Yes," agreed Nellie, "yes, I will tell you everything. Several days before I sold my shop to Mrs. Farmer—"

Her words ended in a scream of terror, for a hard object had crashed through the bedroom window. The shattered glass lay everywhere on the bare floor.

"Someone threw a rock!" Louise gasped.

"And with a paper attached to it," Penny added in a queer tone. She picked it up and her silence warned the others that the message carried serious implications.

"What does it say?" demanded Nellie, half arising from bed.

"Just one word," replied Penny. "'Beware!' Beneath it is a drawing of an old witch!"

CHAPTER

19

A WARNING NOTE

PENNY'S WORDS produced an electrifying effect upon Nellie Marble. The girl stared for a moment at the grotesque black figure stamped on the paper, and then slumped back against the pillows.

"A witch doll," she whispered. "Oh!"

"Let's find out who threw that rock!" Penny cried, and ran to the door.

No one was in sight.

"You go around one side of the cottage, and I'll try the other," Penny said to Louise, who had followed her outside.

They met a minute later by the bedroom window. Although footprints were plainly visible only a few yards away, a search of the bushes near the cottage revealed no one lurking there.

"What do you make of it, Penny?" Louise asked in an undertone.

"Someone must have been listening near the win-

dow. That rock with the witch doll paper attached may have been thrown as a warning to Nellie."

"Thrown by whom, Penny?"

"By some person who followed Nellie to the cottage. Perhaps the same individual who has been making trouble for Miss Harmon. The name escapes me at the moment."

"This is no time for jokes," Louise declared. "Things are getting serious."

"I agree, Lou. It's time we learn just what this witch doll business is all about. I believe Nellie can explain."

"She was ready to tell us a moment ago. The stone coming through the window interrupted her."

"Yes," Penny nodded. "The person who hurled that rock intended it as a warning to Nellie that she wasn't to talk."

Realizing how useless it would be to try to pursue the culprit, the girls went back into the cottage. They found Nellie lying on the bed, her fist tightly closed upon the crumpled paper which bore the picture of the old witch.

"Did you find anyone?" she asked in a whisper.

"No," said Penny cheerfully, "whoever threw that rock managed to get away."

"Such a mean thing to do," Mrs. Slocer declared, sweeping up broken glass.

Penny seated herself by Nellie's bedside, reminding

her that she had started to relate her dealings with Mrs. Farmer.

"Oh, there's nothing to tell," the girl said nervously. "I just didn't like her."

"Isn't it true you sent the witch doll to Miss Harmon?"

"I can't tell you!" Nellie cried. "Oh, please don't ask me!"

She covered her face with her hands and burst into tears.

Nellie became so hysterical that Penny decided it would be cruel to continue the questioning. Later when the girl was stronger she would try again. However, she felt certain that her reluctance to talk had resulted from the warning thrown through the window.

"As soon as you feel able, Nellie, we'll start home," she said gently.

"You still want me?"

"Certainly."

"But I've told you nothing. If you knew the truth—"

"I'll leave that entirely to your judgment, Nellie. Whenever you are ready, I'll be glad to hear your story."

"I wish I could explain—but it would be dangerous. I—I can't make you understand."

"Well, let's forget it for the moment," Penny said. "Are you able to ride into Riverview?"

"Yes. I feel much stronger now."

The girls aided Nellie to the car. They saw her glance anxiously about as if she feared that someone observed her movements.

"No one is around here now," Louise assured her. "We searched the premises carefully."

In saying goodbye to Mrs. Slocer, Penny slipped a bill into her hand to pay for the broken window.

At the Parker home, Mrs. Weems aided the girls in making Nellie comfortable. The girl was put to bed in the guest chamber.

"Whatever you do, don't let Nellie know that I have a witch doll here in the house," Penny warned the housekeeper. "It would frighten her half out of her wits."

"I'll be very careful, Penny. The poor child acts as if she were in a daze."

"Yes, she has had a bad fright. I mean to get the story out of her presently."

Penny spent most of the day by Nellie's bedside. The girl slept much of the time and during her wakeful moments seldom spoke.

When Mr. Parker came home from the office, Penny told him what had occurred at the Slocer cottage.

"You did right in bringing your friend here," he

declared warmly. "Invite her to remain as long as she wishes."

"Dad, it's unfair the way that old woman, Mrs. Farmer, cheated Nellie out of her doll shop. Could you do anything to help?"

"It all depends upon the contract she signed. I might look into it."

"Oh, I wish you would. Why not see Mrs. Farmer tonight?"

"Not this evening, Penny. I have a date at Osandra's."

"Where?" demanded Penny incredulously.

"Well, it's this way," smiled Mr. Parker. "The police have questioned Osandra, and while they believe he is responsible for the robberies, they've been unable to shake his story. The man was released but will be watched. Tonight two plainclothesmen and myself will be present at a seance. We intend to learn first hand just what methods the man uses."

"That's good!" Penny chuckled. "I thought wild horses couldn't drag you to a place such as Osandra's!"

"I am going purely in the interests of my newspaper."

"Take me with you, Dad."

"I don't believe it would be advisable."

"I might be able to help you gather facts," Penny said. "For instance, I happen to have learned some-

thing which has a direct bearing on the case. Perhaps you already know—that Miss Harmon is Osandra's sister."

"His sister!" exclaimed Mr. Parker. "When did you learn that?"

"Today, from Miss Harmon. It's true enough."

She repeated everything the dancer had told her, for she had made no promise to keep the confidence.

"Miss Harmon never went to the police with her story," declared Mr. Parker, obviously impressed. "As for Osandra, he has refused to talk about his family from the first."

"I suppose Miss Harmon lost her courage when it came to the test," Penny said. "She is so afraid her career will be ruined. Dad, I can't believe Osandra had anything to do with those robberies."

"If Miss Harmon is related to him, that does throw matters into a different light. However, the police regard Osandra as a suspect. The man is unwise not to reveal exactly what happened."

"I told Miss Harmon the same thing," Penny nodded. "How about taking me along, Dad? I have a feeling something important may develop and I'd like to be in on it."

"Oh, very well," Mr. Parker consented. "I guess the police won't mind. We're due at the parlors at eight o'clock sharp."

Promptly at the appointed time, Penny and her father presented themselves at Osandra's place on Clark Street. They talked briefly with the two detectives sent from the police station.

"Osandra has promised to show us all the tricks he has used in mystifying his patrons," Mr. Cassidy explained. "We'll re-enact the scene as it was the night of the second robbery. With different actors, of course."

Osandra's assistant met the newcomers at the door, and it seemed to Penny that the hunchback appeared more repulsive than before. She noticed that his gaze followed the two detectives wherever they went.

Osandra had not troubled to dress himself in ceremonial robes. His face was pale, his manner nervous.

"We will begin whenever you are ready, gentlemen."

Penny, her father, and the two detectives seated themselves at the round table. Spider was called in to bind his master hand and foot as upon the previous occasions.

"Actually, I am able to move my feet to a considerable extent," the medium disclosed. "Later I shall press a tiny button under the carpet which will cause a knocking sound on the table."

"And your hands?" inquired Mr. Parker.

"I never make use of them. They are securely bound."

"That's right, Master," chuckled Spider.

"We are now ready for the demonstration," said Osandra. "The lights, Spider."

"Yes, Master."

The hunchback scuttled toward the ante-room.

"Everyone hold hands," Osandra instructed.

Penny sat between Detective Ludwin and her father. Mr. Parker had placed himself on one side of Osandra, while Cassidy occupied a chair at the medium's left.

The lights went out. An oppressive silence settled upon the room. Penny heard Detective Ludwin stir restlessly in his chair. They all waited, expecting the medium to speak.

The moments passed. Suddenly the deep silence was broken by a piercing scream, a cry which froze everyone's blood.

Penny felt her father's hand jerk free from her own. Detective Ludwin's chair went over backwards as he sprang to his feet.

"Turn on those lights!" he shouted. "Turn 'em on!"

The room remained in darkness, but this time Penny knew the location of the light switch. She groped her way to the door.

"Why, it's locked!" she exclaimed. "We're locked in!"

Detective Cassidy muttered angrily as he found his flashlight and turned it on.

"Break down the door, Ludwin!" he commanded. "Osandra has tricked us!"

The men hurled themselves against the panel, and it finally shattered. Even then very little light entered the chamber from outside for the ante-room also was dark.

Penny groped her way to the electric control board and threw a switch. The rooms were instantly flooded with light. As the girl ran back into the seance chamber, her fears were confirmed. Even before she heard Detective Cassidy's angry cry, one glance toward the "throne chair" revealed the situation. Melvin Osandra had vanished.

CHAPTER

20

THE SECRET PANEL

"WE WERE tricked right enough!" shouted Detective Ludwin. "But I'll get that fellow."

Hoping to capture Melvin Osandra before he could escape from the building, the policeman darted down the stairs toward the street.

"How did Osandra get away?" Cassidy demanded gruffly. "He was bound hand and foot. I tested the ropes myself. Yet I distinctly felt him jerk free."

"So did I," declared Mr. Parker, "just an instant before he gave that unearthly scream."

"Dad, have you noticed?" asked Penny, quietly. "Spider is missing too."

"Yes, where is that hunchback?" demanded Detective Cassidy, his anger mounting.

No trace of Spider could be found. Detective Cassidy searched the rooms carefully and even investigated the third floor above Osandra's quarters. He tapped the walls and examined the flooring for a possible trap door.

"It sure beats all," he muttered. "Door locked from the outside—no secret exits, yet both Osandra and his assistant disappeared right from under our noses. This will make me look mighty bad."

"There must be a secret exit if only we could locate it," declared Mr. Parker. "Osandra didn't evaporate in the air."

"This cabinet has a suspicious appearance," Penny remarked, pausing before it.

Detective Cassidy already had examined the "throne chair" and the large piece of inlaid furniture directly behind.

"It's a queer looking contraption," he agreed. "Can't discover anything out of the way about it though. It's just an empty cabinet."

"Yet it must have been here for a purpose," Penny declared.

She opened the door and peered inside. As Detective Cassidy had said, the cabinet was quite empty, and there was no evidence it had ever been used.

Suddenly Penny bent over to study something on the floor of the quaint cupboard. She gave a little exclamation of astonishment.

"Find something, Penny?" asked her father.

"A large footprint, Dad!"

"Let me see!" exclaimed Detective Cassidy.

Penny pointed to the mark on the base of the cabinet.

"It's a footprint all right!" he cried. "Osandra must have escaped through this contraption, but how did he do it?"

"Here is another mark!" cried Penny, indicating a slight smudge on the back of the cabinet. "It looks as if a hand might have been pressed there."

She placed her own fingers over the mark and gave a slight push. The wall of the cabinet immediately swung backward.

"A secret exit!" Cassidy shouted.

Stooping to avoid striking his head, he stepped through the opening. Penny and her father followed.

They found themselves in a narrow space which had been built within the thick walls between the rooms. Only a few steps and they came to a door which Detective Cassidy opened. The three emerged upon a fire escape leading down to the alley.

"Well, we've learned how Osandra managed to get away," the detective remarked. "But it still puzzles me how he could have rid himself of those ropes. He seemed to be securely tied."

"The assistant may have helped him," Mr. Parker suggested.

"That's probably what happened, all right."

Penny had an opinion of her own, and a far differ-

ent one, but fearing that Detective Cassidy would laugh at her, she kept her thoughts to herself.

At the foot of the fire escape, they met Detective Ludwin who had just rounded the building.

"Not a trace of Osandra!" he reported. "Say, how did you get here so quick?"

"Down the fire escape," Cassidy explained. "We found a secret exit."

While the detectives talked with her father, Penny noticed a street urchin standing not far away. She moved over to him, inquiring if he had been in the alley very long.

"What if I have?" he demanded suspiciously.

"I thought you might have seen a man who came down the fire escape a moment ago."

"Sure, I seen him," answered the urchin. "Are those cops lookin' for someone?"

"Yes, for Osandra, the medium."

"Oh, I know that guy," said the boy. "It wasn't Osandra who came down the escape."

"Can you describe the person you did see?"

"He was a little short guy with big broad shoulders."

"I wonder if it could have been Spider, Mr. Osandra's assistant?"

"Oh, I know that little hunchback too!" the urchin

replied. "It wasn't Spider. This man was large, and he was carrying a heavy sack."

"A big sack?" Penny asked quickly.

"Sure, it was a real big one."

"And you're certain it was heavy?"

"Sure, the man staggered when he carried it. He dumped the sack into a car and drove away."

Satisfied that she had learned information of vital importance, Penny summoned her father and the two detectives. She repeated the urchin's story and a few questions convinced Detective Cassidy that the boy was telling the truth.

"Did you notice in which direction the car went?" he inquired.

The urchin thought that it had turned left from the alley, but he could not be certain. He could add very little information to the facts already given Penny.

Dispatching Detective Ludwin to make a complete report at headquarters, Mr. Cassidy drew Penny and her father aside.

"This looks serious," he said gravely. "I don't know just what to make of it. At first I assumed Osandra had tricked us."

"Couldn't he have met with foul play?" Penny asked quickly. "That scream of terror—"

"Just as I was about to say," Detective Cassidy interrupted. "Someone bent upon vengeance may have

spirited Osandra out of that room—a real flesh and blood spirit too!"

"The only exit was through the cabinet," declared Mr. Parker. "Could anyone have known about it, except Osandra?"

"His assistant, Spider," suggested Penny.

"Yes, I imagine he must have known about it."

"He hated his master too, Dad."

"Why do you say that, Penny? Do you have any evidence?"

"Spider always watched Osandra with hatred in his eyes, or so it seemed to me."

"That hunchback was an ugly looking character," said the detective. "I made up my mind to check him up even before all this happened tonight. Still, I don't see how he could have spirited Osandra away."

"The urchin claimed the man he saw wasn't Spider," Mr. Parker commented. "Would it have been physically possible for him to carry Osandra down the fire escape?"

"Well, the medium was bound," Detective Cassidy replied thoughtfully. "Yes, it would have been possible, though I grant you, highly improbable."

"I believe Melvin Osandra feared something like this might happen," Penny said. "Ever since that warning voice cried out in the dark, he has seemed very subdued."

"He was nervous this evening," agreed Cassidy. "I noticed it right away. I'm beginning to think his disappearance is all part of a diabolical scheme, but who planned it I can't say. Our work is cut out for us."

"Well, I wish you luck," Mr. Parker declared. "If I can do anything to help, let me know."

"Just keep this out of the papers for twenty-four hours," the detective requested. "If you will, I believe I can promise you a big story."

"You may depend upon me to cooperate," Mr. Parker agreed. "I am more interested in solving this case than in getting a scoop for the *Star*."

Penny and her father went back into the building for their wraps. Detective Cassidy accompanied them, locking all the doors. He then declared he must get back to the police station.

"If anything develops I'll let you know," he promised.

Penny waited until the detective had left, and then she said to her father: "Dad, there is one person who might throw light upon Osandra's disappearance."

"You mean Miss Harmon?"

"Yes, let's go to her hotel now and learn what she may know about this affair."

"You took the thought right out of my mind," Mr. Parker declared with a broad smile. "Penny, we'll do a bit of sleuthing on our own!"

CHAPTER

21

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE

THE HOUR approached eleven when Mr. Parker and his daughter presented themselves at the Seville Hotel. Miss Harmon and her maid had returned from the theatre only a few minutes earlier.

"We are sorry to disturb you," Mr. Parker apologized. "But something important has come up. Will you see us in the lobby?"

"Yes," agreed the dancer. "I will join you immediately."

The three sought a secluded alcove where their conversation would not be overheard.

"What has occurred?" Miss Harmon asked, noticing Mr. Parker's sober countenance.

"This will prove a shock, I fear," he replied.

"Something has happened to my brother?"

"Yes."

"He has been arrested?"

"It is more serious than that," Mr. Parker returned quietly. "Your brother has vanished."

The information stunned Miss Harmon, and for a moment she made no response. Then, struggling for control, she said: "Please don't keep me in suspense. Tell me just what has happened."

To Mr. Parker's account of the seance and the resulting events, she listened in amazement and horror.

"Oh, how dreadful," she murmured. "Melvin was afraid something might happen to him. He feared for his life."

"Did he have any known enemies?" questioned Mr. Parker.

"Not to my knowledge. But ever since Melvin received that strange warning, he had a premonition harm would befall him. Have the police no clue?"

"A very slender one," Mr. Parker returned. "We hoped that you might be able to throw light on the situation. You are certain your brother had no enemies?"

"He did have one person who hated him," the dancer said, speaking slowly. "But that was so long ago, and the man is in prison now."

"Tell us about it," urged Mr. Parker.

"While my brother and I were living in New York with our parents, this man stole money from Father. Melvin secured proof of it and had him arrested. He was tried, and largely due to the testimony of Melvin and myself, sentenced to fifteen years in prison."

"How long ago was that?" inquired Penny.

"Not more than seven years. The man would still be in prison. He could have had nothing to do with Melvin's disappearance."

"It doesn't seem very likely," agreed Mr. Parker. "What was the fellow's name?"

"Ivan Lavelle."

"Lavelle!" exclaimed the newspaper owner. "Why, haven't you heard? He escaped from the penitentiary about six months ago and was never captured."

"No!"

"Of course that doesn't prove that Lavelle had anything to do with your brother's disappearance," Mr. Parker went on. "In fact, the evidence rather points toward a hunchback assistant who aided your brother."

"Could you tell us anything about Spider?" Penny interposed.

"I knew very little about him. My brother engaged him some months ago when his regular assistant entered a different line of work."

"Your brother trusted him?" questioned Mr. Parker.

"I feel certain he did."

"It occurred to me that Ivan Lavelle might have passed himself off as Spider," Penny declared thoughtfully. "Apparently, such wasn't the case."

"Oh, I knew Lavelle well," Miss Harmon said. "He did not resemble Spider in any respect."

Penny and her father talked for a few minutes longer with the dancer, learning only one additional fact of interest. Melvin Osandra and Spider both had known and made use of the secret exit from the seance parlor. To Miss Harmon's knowledge no other person had shared the information.

"The police are doing everything in their power to trace your brother," Mr. Parker comforted the young woman. "I have confidence he will be found soon."

"I blame myself for all that has happened," Miss Harmon murmured, self accusingly. "If I had told the truth in the first place, this dreadful act might have been prevented."

Penny assisted the dancer to her room, turning her over to the care of the maid, and then returned to the lobby.

"We didn't learn a great deal," Mr. Parker commented. "However, there may be more to this Ivan Lavelle affair than Miss Harmon suspects."

"I wonder if the police have a picture of the man?"

"Unquestionably, Penny. For that matter, I imagine we have one in the *Star's* morgue. I'll run down there now and see. Do you mind going home alone?"

"Not at all."

"You take the car and I'll ride a bus home," her father said. "It is too late for you to be on the streets."

Mr. Parker escorted Penny to the automobile, waving goodbye as she drove away.

The night was dark. She had not gone many blocks before a heavy rain began to fall. During the past week there had been several storms. Penny was tired of such unseasonable weather. She snapped on the windshield wiper, thinking of her father who did not have even the protection of a raincoat.

Passing the Sidell residence which was dark, Penny drove on toward home, her thoughts turning from the events of the evening to Nellie Marble. She wondered what the girl had started to tell her at the Slocer cottage. Who could have thrown the rock through the window?

The longer Penny reflected upon the situation, the more firmly she became convinced that Nellie could explain many baffling matters if only she chose. To all appearances, there was no connection between the witch doll happenings and Melvin Osandra's strange disappearance, yet the girl had a feeling that such a relationship might exist. She made up her mind she would make another attempt to win Nellie's confidence.

Upon turning into the driveway, Penny observed that lights were burning on the upper floor, evidence that someone was still awake.

"I hope Nellie isn't ill," she thought anxiously.

She left the car in the garage, and without taking time to lock the doors, hastened into the house.

"Is that you, Penny?" called the housekeeper from the second floor.

"Yes, Mrs. Weems. Dad went back to the office so I came home alone."

"I am so relieved you are here, Penny. I waited up for you."

"Is anything wrong? Nellie isn't feeling worse?"

When Mrs. Weems did not reply, Penny ran up the steps two at a time. A light burned in the guest room. She moved to the door which stood half open.

The room was deserted.

"Mrs. Weems, where are you?" Penny called anxiously. "What has happened to Nellie?"

CHAPTER

22

IDENTIFYING A SCOUNDREL

MRS. WEEMS came down the hallway, her arms loaded with clean linen.

"I was just making up the spare bed," she explained.

"Where is Nellie? You didn't send her to a hospital?"

"Oh, no, your friend seemed somewhat improved. She just went away."

"I don't understand, Mrs. Weems."

"Well, I was worried about it," the housekeeper admitted, "but there was nothing I could do. The man claimed to be a relative."

"What man?" Penny questioned. "Do you mean Nellie went away with someone?"

"Yes, this person came about fifteen minutes ago. I was in bed. He kept ringing the doorbell until I dressed and answered it."

"Who was the man, Mrs. Weems?"

"He refused to give his name, but insisted upon seeing Nellie."

"At this time of night?"

"Yes, he pushed his way into the house and refused to leave. Nellie finally came down and talked with him."

"She knew the man?"

"She appeared to, but at first she was greatly upset. Later, after they had talked, she went away with him."

"She went willingly?"

"Yes," Mrs. Weems replied. "It struck me as peculiar because she had acted afraid. Her attitude seemed to change."

"Can you describe this person who called for her?"

"He was common and coarse looking. Fairly short with coal black hair and eyes. I didn't care for his appearance at all."

"I can't understand why Nellie would go away like this without a word of explanation," Penny murmured.

"She left you a note."

The housekeeper brought a sealed envelope and gave it to Penny, who quickly scanned the brief message.

Nellie had written:

> "Forgive me for going away without a word of gratitude. It is best for both of us that I leave now. Please do not try to find me."

"This doesn't explain a thing," Penny said, reading the note aloud. "If anything, it leaves the matter in a

worse tangle. What could Nellie mean by saying it was best for both of us that she go away? It doesn't make sense."

"The poor girl couldn't have been herself."

"Did she seem in a dazed condition?"

"Well, she acted peculiarly."

"I suppose she gave you no hint of where she was going, Mrs. Weems?"

"Not the slightest."

Penny thoughtfully folded the note and placed it in her handkerchief box.

"Did I do wrong in allowing her to leave?" Mrs. Weems asked anxiously.

"I don't see what else you could have done," Penny said kindly. "But I am worried. I have a feeling that Nellie, in the false belief she could spare me in some way, walked straight into trouble."

"Oh, dear, what shall we do? Notify the police?"

"Not yet, at least. I'll ask Dad's advice when he comes home."

Returning shortly after midnight, Mr. Parker found Penny curled up in the arm chair, fast asleep. She woke up immediately and helped him off with his overcoat.

"Still raining?" she inquired.

"Yes, quite hard. If this continues all night we may have a flood. They've had heavy rains all around us, and the river is above normal level now. You shouldn't have waited up for me, Penny."

"I had something to tell you, Dad. Nellie went away with a stranger who came here after we left. She was in no condition to go anywhere in this rain. Her bad cold easily could develop into something more serious."

"Who was the man?"

"Mrs. Weems couldn't learn. He claimed to be a relative, but I wonder—"

"Aren't you inclined to be overly suspicious?" Mr. Parker smiled. "From what you have told me, Nellie Marble always acted rather queer."

"Yes, she did."

"If I remember correctly, she rebuffed your friendship once before. Since she left our home by choice, I would forget about her."

Penny frowned for she did not agree with her father's viewpoint. She could not believe that Nellie deliberately had intended to repulse her friendship.

"Did you learn anything more about Ivan Lavelle?" she inquired after a moment.

"I dug up a photograph in the morgue."

Mr. Parker removed the picture from his pocket and offered it to Penny. She stared for some moments at the likeness of the escaped convict. Ivan Lavelle had a sullen face with a square jaw and heavy, bushy eyebrows.

"Recognize him?" Mr. Parker asked jokingly.

"No," said Penny, "but I feel as if I should. Those dark eyes—why, Dad, Spider had similar eyes."

"Spider may have had black eyes, but that doesn't prove he is Ivan Lavelle. Remember, the man is a hunchback."

"Just the same, I believe he had something to do with Osandra's abduction," Penny insisted. "Have the police found any new clues?"

"Not that our reporters have been able to learn. The case is proving baffling. Cassidy is afraid he'll be demoted if he fails to solve it soon."

"I hope for Miss Harmon's sake that he does."

"Yes." Mr. Parker yawned and glanced at the clock. "It's late. Suppose we turn in."

The patter of rain on the roof lulled Penny to sleep. When she came downstairs for breakfast she learned that her father had left the house early. It was still drizzling, and great puddles of water stood on the lawn.

"Such a day," Penny complained. "Why does it always rain when I'm feeling blue?"

"Perhaps it might be the other way around," smiled Mrs. Weems.

"No, it takes more than rain to depress me usually," Penny returned. "But practically everything has gone wrong."

"You're out of sorts because Nellie went away."

"Yes, I am," Penny agreed. "If she had stayed one more day, I believe the witch doll mystery could have been cleared up."

"Well, the girl is gone, so you may as well make the best of it," Mrs. Weems advised. "Why not go to a movie today?"

"They don't make good pictures any more," Penny complained.

"You are in a blue mood, I must say."

Penny helped with the breakfast dishes and cleaned the spare bedroom. In straightening her own room she came upon Miss Harmon's witch doll.

"You let me down shamefully," she said crossly. "For two cents I'd burn you in the furnace."

Jamming the doll down in the bureau drawer again, she went on with the cleaning work. She flipped a dust cloth carelessly over the furniture, and then assisted Mrs. Weems with the downstairs.

As she cleared papers from the living room table, she came upon the photograph of Ivan Lavelle which her father had left there the previous night. Penny stared at it for a moment.

Suddenly she started for the kitchen.

"Mrs. Weems! Did Dad show you this picture?"

The housekeeper wiped her hands, as she inquired in surprise: "What picture, Penny?"

"Oh, my latest boy friend," Penny responded with

a return of her old spirit. "Just an escaped convict."

Disregarding the girl's attempted sally, Mrs. Weems took the picture. One glance at the face of Ivan Lavelle and she uttered a startled cry.

"Do you recognize him?" Penny demanded.

"Let me take the picture to a better light."

Mrs. Weems moved to the window. She studied the photograph for a moment.

"Yes, I was right!" she exclaimed. "This is the same man who took Nellie away last night!"

CHAPTER

23

INSIDE THE DOLL SHOP

"ARE YOU quite certain, Mrs. Weems?" Penny inquired anxiously.

"Yes, I am sure it is the same man. One couldn't forget such a face as this."

"Then Nellie walked straight into trouble when she left our house last night!" Penny exclaimed.

"Oh, I was afraid something dreadful had happened to her," Mrs. Weems said self-accusingly. "It was all my fault. Why did I allow her to go away with the man?"

"The strange thing is that she would leave willingly," Penny replied.

Hurrying to the telephone, she called the *Star* office, telling her father of Mrs. Weems' identification. Mr. Parker promised he would communicate with the police at once that a net might be spread for the missing convict. He too was alarmed over Nellie's welfare.

Penny ran all the way to the Sidell home. As she had expected, Louise was shocked by the double piece

of news, that Melvin Osandra was missing and Nellie Marble had gone away with a man thought to be Ivan Lavelle.

"Do you suppose she knew he was an escaped convict?" Louise asked.

"I'm not sure, but I believe she was deathly afraid of someone, and it may have been him. Nellie is a nervous wreck these days. It would be easy to influence her by threats."

"But how did she ever get mixed up in such an affair? Poor Nellie!"

"I feel certain she's in grave danger, Lou. We simply have to find her!"

"But what can we do? We haven't the faintest idea where she went."

"One angle of this case has never been investigated. From the very first Nellie was afraid of Mrs. Farmer."

"She did act that way."

"Mrs. Farmer did something which terrified Nellie," Penny went on. "I'd like to learn what it was."

"That woman would never tell us anything."

"I realize it would be useless to question her, but I have another scheme in mind."

"What is it?" Louise asked eagerly.

"I have a theory Mrs. Farmer may know this man Lavelle. Now suppose we hide out and see what goes on in the doll shop. I have a notion she never bought

that place because she was interested in building up a doll business!"

"Don't you think it might prove dangerous to attempt anything like that? If Mrs. Farmer should suspect—"

"We'll see to it that she doesn't," Penny declared.

"I'm willing to take a risk if you are," Louise consented.

"Let's get busy right away then," Penny urged.

The girls walked rapidly to the outskirts of Riverview, slackening their pace as they came near the Marble Doll Shoppe. Window blinds were drawn and there was no sign of activity about the place.

"Do you suppose the shop is closed?" Louise asked.

"It looks that way," Penny admitted. "Perhaps Mrs. Farmer has gone away too. Disappearances seem to be the vogue just now."

After inspecting the premises from a distance, Louise casually walked past the shop, and came back to report that a sign, "Out of Business," had been posted on the door.

"Why should Mrs. Farmer close the shop so soon after she bought it?" Penny demanded.

"Maybe her business fell off so that it wasn't profitable."

"With a disposition like hers I don't doubt she lost customers," Penny agreed, "but it isn't likely she'd

give up so soon. No, Louise, Mrs. Farmer never intended to run this place as a doll shop."

"Then why did she buy it?"

"That's just what I mean to learn! Come along, Lou, let's go around to the rear of the building."

The curtains on the alley side of the shop likewise had been drawn.

"We can't learn anything here," Louise declared. "The place is closed all right."

"It looks like it," Penny admitted in disappointment. "I wish we could get inside somehow."

She tested the door and found it locked. Louise started to walk away.

"Wait," Penny commanded, "I have an idea!"

"You and your ideas!" Louise scoffed but she returned to lend an attentive ear.

"I know how we might get inside, Lou! I remember Nellie once told me that one of these back windows wouldn't lock. She complained several times to the building owner, but couldn't get him to do anything about it."

"Penny, are you aiming to land in jail?" Louise demanded indignantly. "I'm not going to force my way into any shop! If we were caught we'd be arrested!"

"Oh, Dad could bail us out," Penny grinned. "Besides, there is no policeman in this district."

"It's broad daylight," Louise declared. "Someone would be certain to see us."

"This alley is deserted, Lou."

"I don't see what you expect to gain if we do get inside," Louise complained. "Anyway, the window probably has been fixed by this time."

"We'll see," said Penny.

She went along the wall, testing each window. Finally she came to one which could be pushed up. She thrust her head through the opening and listened. All was quiet within the doll shop.

"Here goes!" she chuckled.

Deftly, she swung herself up to the ledge and over the sill. Louise had a little struggle with herself, and then decided to follow. She was not as agile as her chum, lacking the muscular strength to lift herself all the way up to the ledge.

Penny grabbed her by the wrists and pulled. Louise squirmed through the opening, landing in an ungainly heap on the floor.

"It's lucky the place is deserted," Penny laughed. "You arrive with more noise than a fire engine!"

"Pull down that window before someone catches us," Louise commanded. "I don't enjoy this business even a little bit."

Penny closed the window and then glanced about the room. The show cases were still filled with dolls

just as Nellie had left them, but covered with a layer of dust. Apparently the shop had not been swept out since Mrs. Farmer had taken over the business.

"Let's have a look at the back room," said Penny.

The living quarters were in an even worse state of disarray. Clothing lay upon the floor, the sink was filled with an accumulation of dirty dishes, and pots of molding food stood on the kitchen range.

"Such a mess!" Louise exclaimed. "How could any person be so untidy?"

She opened a closet and noticed Nellie's neatly pressed dresses hanging in an orderly row, a distinct contrast to the remainder of the room. However, one frock lay on the floor, and in picking it up Louise saw that it had been torn in many places.

"Mrs. Farmer probably did that when Nellie ran away," Penny remarked. "She has a violent temper as I'm willing to testify."

Noticing a folded newspaper on the sink, she picked it up and glanced at the date line.

"Why, this is yesterday's paper, Louise! Mrs. Farmer or some other person must have occupied this room as late as that."

Penny's voice trailed away as a story on the front page of the sheet attracted her interest. It was an account of the second robbery at Osandra's seance parlor, and had been marked with a heavy black pencil.

"Look at this, Louise!" she cried. "Mrs. Farmer evidently was interested in the story. I wonder why?"

Replacing the paper exactly where she had found it, Penny began a more careful survey of the room. Almost at once she came upon a pair of men's shoes.

"Now we *are* making discoveries," she murmured. "Notice anything peculiar about these shoes, Lou?"

"Only that it's very strange that Mrs. Farmer should have men's shoes."

"I mean the size. These shoes look as if they might just about fit the footprints we discovered at the Slocer cottage."

"I don't see how you can remember that well, Penny."

"I measured them with my hand. Not accurately, of course. These shoes are just about the same size."

"You should be a detective—" Louise began, and then the words died away.

In panic she grasped Penny's hand. Both girls had heard a key turning in a lock.

"Someone is coming!" Louise whispered. "We're caught!"

Penny did not waste her breath. Instead she pulled Louise toward the door leading into the show room.

"Down behind the counter!" she ordered.

Scarcely had the girls dropped out of sight when Mrs. Farmer entered through the rear door of the

shop. From her hiding place, Penny observed that the woman did not bother to turn the key again in the lock. Their escape had not been cut off. It would be much easier to get out through the door than to attempt the window.

With a surprisingly youthful tread, Mrs. Farmer walked past the counter into the back room. She glanced sharply about but did not appear to notice anything amiss.

"Now is our chance!" Louise whispered nervously. "Let's get out of here before she finds us!"

Penny nodded, and the girls noiselessly stole from their cramped quarters. An unexpected sound from the next room caused them to freeze against the wall. Mrs. Farmer had emerged into plain view. For one terrifying moment they believed that she had seen them.

They breathed easier when the woman did not glance in their direction. She moved toward a cupboard which the girls had not had time to examine, and removed a large pasteboard box.

Louise tugged impatiently at her chum's hand but Penny had forgotten about her desire to escape. In fascination she watched Mrs. Farmer.

The woman had opened the pasteboard box. From its deep recess, she removed several weird looking objects.

"Witch dolls!" Penny whispered. "Six of them!"

Unaware that she was being observed, Mrs. Farmer sat down on the floor, and taking the dolls into her lap, crooned over them.

"Little dears," the girls heard her mutter. "Little imps of evil, you will yet accomplish your work—you will avenge the great injustice done Ivan Lavelle!"

CHAPTER

24

UNDER THE KITCHEN

UNABLE TO resist the temptation of learning more, the two girls stole back to their hiding place behind the counter. They were amazed at the strange sight they had witnessed.

Penny now believed that Mrs. Farmer had been responsible for sending the witch doll to Helene Harmon, and that in some way she was connected with the escaped convict, Ivan Lavelle.

After a few minutes, the old woman replaced the witch dolls in the cardboard container, pushing it out of sight under the cot. She then brewed herself a cup of coffee and ate a lunch of canned beans and cold meat.

"Let's go," whispered Louise. "We've learned all we can."

Penny shook her head. Without knowing exactly why, she sensed that if they were patient they might make even more important discoveries.

Having finished her luncheon, Mrs. Farmer dumped the dishes into the sink. She then set to work making sandwiches, using plain slabs of meat between unbuttered, moldy bread. The sight fairly nauseated Louise.

"How could that creature eat such vile food?" she whispered.

"She doesn't intend it for herself," guessed Penny. "I'll bet those sandwiches are meant for some other person."

In a moment she had further proof of her words. Mrs. Farmer took a small brown jug and filled it with water from the tap at the sink. She placed the container on the table beside the sandwiches.

A conviction now came upon both Penny and Louise that the woman intended to take the food and water to someone who was held a prisoner. Could that person be Melvin Osandra? They wondered.

Their attention returned to Mrs. Farmer as they saw her cross the room again. She washed her face at the sink. Then with a sudden motion, she jerked off a gray wig!

"A man!" gasped Louise. "All this time he's been wearing a disguise, pretending to be Mrs. Farmer!"

The man swiftly divested himself of the long dress, beneath which he wore a complete costume of trou-

sers, shirt and jacket. As he turned toward them, the girls saw his face plainly.

"Ivan Lavelle!" Penny whispered in awe. "Dad showed me his picture!"

The man placed the discarded garments in a suitcase which contained other clothing. Sliding the bag under the cot, he turned once more toward the stove.

To the astonishment of the girls he gave it a hard shove. The range moved sideways out of position, disclosing a door cut into the flooring underneath. They saw the man pull up the trap, and taking the jug of water and the sandwiches, he cautiously lowered himself down a ladder.

"Well, what do you think of that!" gasped Louise.

Waiting for several minutes, the girls moved noiselessly across the room to the gaping hole where the man had vanished. Their eyes penetrated only a few feet into the black cavern.

"What do you suppose is down there, Penny?"

"A prison, Louise. That fiend probably is holding Melvin Osandra a captive."

"Osandra? Then that shatters your theory that he was spirited away by Spider."

Penny did not answer for she had pulled the suitcase from beneath the bed. She removed the disguise which the man had worn while posing as Mrs. Farmer,

and a smile of triumph came over her face. In the bottom of the case lay a strange padded object.

"What in the world is that?" Louise asked in a whisper.

"I'll show you," said Penny.

She slipped the leather straps over her shoulders so that the pads fell into position on her back. Bending low, she took a few steps across the room. Louise instantly caught the idea.

"Another disguise!"

"Yes, and a clever one. Lavelle pawned himself off as Spider, the hunchback!"

"But how could he change his face and voice?"

"The man is a marvelous actor. He used make-up too."

Penny tore off the "humps," packing all of the garments and the pair of shoes previously found back into the suitcase. She caught up the newspaper with the penciled robbery story.

"We'll confiscate this stuff as evidence, Louise. And now the thing to do is to get the police here as quickly as we can."

"Yes, that man may take a notion to come back any minute."

Penny thrust the suitcase into her chum's hand.

"There is your loot," she said. "Take it straight to

the police station, and bring help as fast as possible."

"You're coming with me."

"No, someone should stay here and watch."

"Penny, I'm afraid to leave you."

"Hurry!" Penny gave her a little push. "After you've called the police, telephone Dad at the office. I'd hate to have him miss a big story."

"I'll take care of everything and get back here just as quickly as I can," Louise promised.

Left alone in the empty doll shop, Penny moved quietly over to the hole in the floor. She reflected that it would be a simple matter to close down the trap, swing the range into place, and keep Ivan Lavelle a prisoner. Yet perhaps the cavern had another exit.

As the minutes passed and the man did not return, Penny began to grow uneasy.

"Maybe he did slip out another way," she thought. "What a dud I'd be to sit here and wait while he made his escape!"

The possibility of such a thing tormented Penny beyond endurance. Finally she decided to learn just what had happened.

Cautiously, she made her way down the steep ladder, counting fourteen steps before she reached the bottom. The air was damp and musty.

Penny could see only a short distance in front of her. As far as she could tell she was in a narrow tun-

nel, leading circuitously away from the doll shop, but where it went she could not hazard a guess.

Groping her way along the cold walls, bending to avoid striking her head, the fear came to Penny that Ivan Lavelle had escaped. She pushed on, her anxiety making her less cautious.

Then she was brought up short by the sound of a man's voice. The mocking words sent a chill running down her spine.

"Are you quite comfortable, my master? Drink your fill, dear Osandra, for this day will be your last!"

Penny moved stealthily down the tunnel until she reached an arching doorway opening into a room. There she beheld a shocking sight, one which she would remember for many a day.

Melvin Osandra, his face twisted with pain, stood chained to a wooden post. At the other end of the chamber, likewise fettered, was still another prisoner —Nellie Marble.

Even as Penny recognized her, the girl had a hard spell of coughing which seemed to delight her captor.

"You do not like the damp air, my dear?" he chuckled wickedly. "No? Perhaps next time you will not try to defy Ivan Lavelle! Unfortunately, for you, my sweet, there will be no next time!"

He offered Nellie a drink from the jug, but scarcely

had she taken a sip when he jerked it from her lips.

"You fiend!" muttered Melvin Osandra.

"Soon you both will have all the water you wish!" the man laughed harshly. "Yes, all you wish!"

"Go away and let us die in peace," Osandra moaned.

"I shall go away, for my work is not yet finished," chuckled Ivan Lavelle. "Before nightfall you will have company, my dear master. Are you not lonely for your beautiful sister?"

"You heartless monster!" Osandra cried. "Take your vengeance out upon me, but leave Helene alone!"

Unable to witness the scene a moment longer, Penny turned and fled down the passageway. She prayed the police would come soon so that the two prisoners might be spared further torture.

Her thoughts upon the horror she had viewed, Penny had no intimation of danger. Yet she had covered barely half the distance to the ladder, when without warning she collided with someone coming from the opposite direction. For just an instant she thought that it was Louise. Then she felt long, bony fingers grasping for her throat.

Penny fought like a tiger. Her assailant was a woman, and no match for the athletic girl. However, when she might have gained the upper hand, footsteps came pounding down the passageway.

"Lavelle!" screamed Penny's antagonist. "Help! Help!"

A powerful hand grasped her by the shoulder and pulled her backward. Penny whirled around but could not free herself. She gazed directly into the leering face of Ivan Lavelle.

"Good work, Felice," the man praised. "We capture another bird for our cage!"

The electric torch was flashed close into Penny's face and then she was dragged down the passageway. Her struggles were useless for Ivan Lavelle's muscles had the texture of iron. The woman followed them down the tunnel, speaking excitedly.

"I came to tell you I am quitting, Lavelle. This is dangerous business and I don't like it. When I agreed to do your bidding I never supposed you would go to such lengths. Already Miss Harmon is suspicious."

"I'll have her in my net too before nightfall," the man boasted. "You will be paid well for your work, Felice."

"What do you intend to do with your prisoners?"

Ivan Lavelle's reply took the form of an evil chuckle.

"I wish I had never become mixed up in this," the woman went on. "You're going too far, Lavelle—"

"When I want your opinion I'll ask it," the man snarled. "For years I have awaited this moment. Now that it is here, no one shall cheat me! Do you under-

stand? No one!" His voice rose to a shrill scream.

"Hush!" Felice warned. "Someone will hear you!"

She watched nervously as Penny was bound with stout cord. Lavelle then carried the girl to the prison chamber. Melvin Osandra and Nellie stirred slightly and the latter aroused from the stupor into which she had fallen.

"Penny!"

"Not a very bright penny this time. The gorilla got me too!"

The flippant remark infuriated Ivan Lavelle. He dumped the girl down on the earth beside Nellie, cruelly tightening her bonds before chaining her to the post. Penny winced with pain.

"Go on, enjoy yourself," she muttered. "It won't be for long."

"You are quite right," he leered. "Not for long. Felice and I must take ourselves to a safer place. The river is rising faster than I planned."

With an ugly laugh, he turned away. Penny followed the retreating figures of the man and woman until they disappeared beyond a bend in the tunnel. Then, with the electric torch no longer visible, the prison chamber was left to darkness.

"Nellie, have courage!" Penny said, struggling to control her voice. "We'll soon be free! Louise has gone for help!"

"It will come too late," Nellie whispered. "Listen!"

Not until that moment did Penny become conscious of a strange sound. She could not be certain what it was although it resembled the gurgling of water. Suddenly, Ivan Lavelle's final words flashed into her mind.

"Nellie," she said, "what did that fiend mean about the river?"

"Didn't you know, Penny?" There was a note of pity in the other's voice. "This tunnel empties down by the river."

"And at flood stage, the chamber is submerged?"

"Yes, already the water is seeping in. Ivan Lavelle has left us to drown."

CHAPTER

25

A TRIUMPH FOR PENNY

HOURS ELAPSED, or so it seemed to the prisoners in the underground room. The water from the rising river slowly crept higher until it swished about Penny's ankles. Any attempt to free herself only made the cords cut more deeply into her flesh.

"Why doesn't Louise come?" she thought miserably. "Something must have happened to her."

Hope of a rescue was fast ebbing away, but Penny tried to maintain a cheerful attitude, assuring Nellie and Melvin Osandra that help would arrive at any minute.

"I don't suppose it matters a great deal now," she presently said to the girl, "but I wonder how you came to be mixed up in all this mess?"

"It was all due to that horrible creature," Nellie answered. "I believed her to be Mrs. Farmer. She asked me to make a witch doll. I thought it was only for a joke and did as she requested. We sent the doll to Miss Harmon in a box bearing the name of my shop."

"You didn't write the threatening note?"

"No, Mrs. Farmer—I mean that man—wrote it."

"Weren't you suspicious, Nellie?"

"Not right at first. Later when I began to guess that something was wrong, I was terribly afraid. I thought I might be arrested. Oh, Penny, if only I had taken your advice and refused to sell my shop to Mrs. Farmer."

"It was a natural mistake to make. Then what happened?"

"I didn't suspect the truth until Mrs. Farmer took over the shop. After that, she wasn't so careful. She set me to making witch dolls."

"The idea being to frighten Miss Harmon out of her wits by replacing the original doll whenever she disposed of it?"

"I'm not sure. I think that was the scheme."

"When did you learn the truth about Mrs. Farmer's identity?"

"The very first day. Quite by accident I saw her remove her gray wig. Then she pushed back the kitchen range and went down into this hole in the ground."

"You never suspected the tunnel was here, Nellie?"

"No, but I should have had an inkling. My shop building was a very old one. In fact, I've been told it

dates back to Civil War times, and was built by a man who bitterly opposed slavery."

"He may have been an Underground Railroader!" Penny exclaimed.

"I figure it that way. The tunnel leading to the river probably was built as an escape for Negroes smuggled from the South."

"Ivan Lavelle learned about it and decided to make use of it for his own cruel purposes."

"Yes, he was determined to get the shop at any cost. I am sure he was the one who smashed my dolls so that I would be in a mood to sell."

"There's one thing I can't understand, Nellie," said Penny. "Why did you go away with Lavelle when he came to our house? Had you any idea he was an escaped convict?"

"No, I only knew he had been masquerading as Mrs. Farmer. The man said he wished to talk with me, and that if I did not come he would make trouble for you."

"I thought it might be something like that."

"It was a mistake for me to leave your home," Nellie went on. "Lavelle made a prisoner of me, bringing me to this dreadful tunnel."

Melvin Osandra had listened to the story. He now offered his thought, speaking hesitantly because of the pain he suffered from his half paralyzed limbs.

"The man has a twisted mind. He fancies that Helene and I were responsible for sending him to prison. I know now that he robbed her of the diamond necklace that evening at my establishment."

"Did you never suspect Lavelle had assumed a hunchback disguise?" Penny questioned.

"He fooled me completely. You see, I had never seen Lavelle but twice until he began working for me, and he had altered in appearance. Then he used make-up and fake humps on his back."

"How did you come to employ him?"

"Well, my old assistant quit, and I needed someone. This fellow offered to work for half price. He was an ugly creature, but I thought his appearance might add to the general weird atmosphere which I tried to achieve."

"And you were never suspicious of him?"

"No, Spider did his work well. He was with me several months and I learned to take him for granted."

"Yet all the while he was biding his time, waiting for a chance to strike!"

"Yes, he had worked out a scheme of revenge, and he carried it through to the last detail. First, he warned me—do you remember that voice?"

"Could one ever forget?"

"I should have been suspicious then, but Spider had altered his voice."

"How did he produce the effect?"

"Oh, he knew all the secrets of my trade. He entered the cabinet and spoke from there. Since I trusted Spider, I believed him when he swore he could not explain the mysterious voice."

"I wonder why he gave you any warning at all?"

"The fellow enjoyed my mental suffering. He tried to play upon my feelings, building up to the big denouement."

"He tried the same trick upon your sister. By making the witch doll reappear whenever she disposed of it, he led her to believe in the supernatural. Lavelle must have been the person who created the disturbance in the theatre. And he frightened Miss Harmon half out of her wits by imprinting a witch doll picture on the back wall of the building."

"I can't see how he made the doll reappear after my sister had thrown it away," Osandra declared.

"Oh, that was done through her maid, Felice. It was easy for the woman to substitute another doll whenever the original vanished. Undoubtedly, she gave Lavelle information about the necklace too. He paid her for her work."

"Oh, the man worked out his plan very cleverly," Osandra said bitterly. "I fell into his trap like an innocent babe."

"How were you brought here?" asked Penny.

"I was bound that night at the parlors. Lavelle, dressed as Spider, entered the cabinet, and protected

by darkness, jerked me through the panel. He swung me on his shoulder and in a specially constructed sack, carried me down to an automobile waiting in the alley. I couldn't shout because he had clapped a gag into my mouth. The man had the strength of a demon!"

"And the worst is that he has escaped," Nellie added with a moan. "We'll drown, and no one will ever learn the truth."

"The river may not come very high," said Penny cheerfully. "Anyway, it will take hours. Before that someone surely will come. We might try calling for help."

"We've already tried," Nellie answered. "Voices can't be heard in the doll shop."

"If I ever get out of this mess, I swear I'll give up my place on Clark street and go into a different line of work," Osandra muttered. "But there's no chance of us escaping."

Even as he spoke, the three were startled to hear the indistinct murmur of voices somewhere in the passageway.

"That can't be Felice or Ivan Lavelle!" Penny exclaimed. "Scream for help!"

Melvin Osandra was too exhausted to offer more than a hoarse croak, but the two girls made the tunnel echo with their shouts.

"Hello!" called a voice from a long distance away.

In another minute they saw a light, and several shadowy figures came running down the passageway. With a thrill of joy and relief, Penny recognized her father, Louise, and five blue-coated policemen.

"Here we are, Dad!" she shouted.

"Are you all right?" Mr. Parker cried, rushing to his daughter.

"Yes," she answered, "don't worry about me. Just get the others out of here. Mr. Osandra is in bad shape. And start the police after that convict, Ivan Lavelle."

"He's already on his way to the lock-up," said Mr. Parker, working at Penny's fetters.

"Lavelle was captured?"

"Yes, along with Miss Harmon's maid, Felice. How that woman could scratch and bite! I know because I held her until the police snapped cuffs on her wrists."

"I thought they both would get away. So many hours have elapsed—"

"Not that long," said Louise. "I hurried as fast as I could. We got back here just as Lavelle and the woman were leaving the shop. There was quite a chase and it took time before they could be subdued."

"And to think I missed all the excitement!"

"I'd say you were in the thick of it myself," Mr. Parker declared. "In another two hours, at the rate the river is rising, you'd have been drowned! When I think of it—"

"Then don't," laughed Penny. "I'm quite all right, only I wish I had worn my rubbers."

"I'm sorry it took us so long to reach you," Louise apologized. "You see, I never dreamed you would go down into the tunnel. I thought probably we'd find you hiding out somewhere near the shop."

The police quickly freed Melvin Osandra, but the man was too weak to walk. They carried him upstairs and sent for an ambulance.

"Is he in a dangerous condition?" Penny asked anxiously.

"No, he should be himself again in a week or so," one of the policemen assured her.

Nellie seemed little the worse for her experience save that she had a bad cold.

"We'll send you to a hospital too," Mr. Parker told her. "Several days rest will do wonders for you. Then we'll bring you home with us until you are able to reestablish yourself in the doll shop."

"This place will have such dreadful memories—" Nellie murmured.

"Oh, we'll find you a new, better building," Penny declared.

"You've been so kind to me," Nellie said, tears streaming down her face. "I don't know how to tell you—"

"Please don't try," Penny replied gently. "Just hop

into that ambulance and go to the hospital like a good child."

"I'll ride with you," Louise offered, realizing that Nellie might feel deserted. She climbed into the vehicle after Nellie.

The ambulance pulled away and Penny was left alone with her father.

"Dad, don't you think Lavelle's capture might make a good newspaper story?" she asked.

"A good story!" he echoed. "Why, it's tremendous! We'll scoop every paper in town if we hurry. Hey, taxi!"

Hailing a passing cab, he pulled Penny into it and they sped toward the *Star* office. Already Mr. Parker's mind was thinking in terms of headlines.

"We'll play it for all it's worth," he murmured. "A screaming banner that Lavelle has been captured, an account of the police battle, then your own signed story of what happened in the tunnel, and the events leading up to Osandra's mysterious disappearance."

"You really want me to write the story?" Penny asked incredulously.

"I do. Think you can swing it? We'll have to get those presses rolling in double-quick time."

"I'll try my hardest, Dad."

"You really were responsible for Lavelle's appre-

hension," Mr. Parker went on. "Shouldn't be surprised if you and Louise would win a reward!"

"Honestly? Then maybe I'll have money enough to put Leaping Lena on the highways again!"

The *Star* office was thrown into a state of feverish activity as Mr. Parker and his daughter descended upon the staff.

"Great story!" the newspaper owner barked to Dewitt, the city editor. "Ivan Lavelle captured by police! We're going to town on it!"

"Right!" snapped Dewitt. "Livingston, get down to the station. Telephone in the latest. We'll want photographs. Where's Gregory?"

Penny heard no more for her father pushed a typewriter in front of her. He shot a long sheet of yellow copy paper into the roller.

"No flowery English," he said. "Write it simple. Shoot straight from the shoulder and shoot fast."

Penny stared at the blank sheet of paper for a moment. She pecked out a sentence, crossed it out, and started again.

"Never mind the lead," Mr. Parker said nervously. "Dewitt can take care of that."

"Dad, this is my story," Penny moaned. "I wish you'd go away and leave me alone. I can do it, but not with you hovering over my shoulder."

Mr. Parker nodded, and went to his own typewriter. The steady tap of the keys seemed to give Penny the

confidence she needed. Soon she was writing as rapidly as her father, and now and then a chuckle escaped her as she wrote a sentence which particularly pleased her.

When Dewitt came and looked over her shoulder ten minutes later, she scarcely was aware of his presence. She did hear him say to her father in an undertone:

"Going great! I'll not have to change a word!"

Before Penny had finished the story, Dewitt jerked off the first part of it so that he could write the headline. She kept on, and at last wrote "30" at the end of her copy. The tale was ended in the allotted time.

"I'm proud of you, Penny," Mr. Parker declared. "I didn't see your story, but Dewitt said it was fine."

"You may not like one paragraph," she hinted.

"Oh, I'll take Dewitt's judgment any day, Penny. We scooped the town! Jerry Livingston sent in Lavelle's signed confession from the police station. The man has given up Miss Harmon's diamond necklace and other stolen loot. He plotted everything just about as you figured it out."

"Maybe I'll make a reporter yet."

"You're the best man on my staff now," Mr. Parker laughed.

"What will happen to Lavelle and that woman, Felice?"

"Oh, they'll both get prison terms. Lavelle still has an old sentence to serve."

"And Nellie?"

"She'll not be held. It will be easy to prove she had no real part in the witch doll affair."

Penny rocked back in the swivel chair and sighed.

"It's fun being a reporter," she observed, "but it's too exhausting a life. After this, I shall rest upon my laurels."

However, the future files of the *Star* were to carry still another remarkable tale, a mystery yarn widely proclaimed under the name, "The Vanishing Houseboat," but this, of course, Penny could not know.

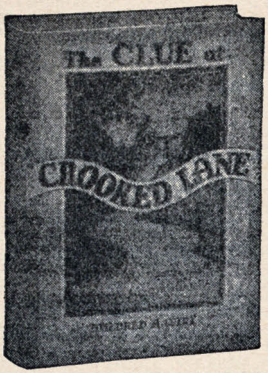
Nor did she realize that her own name had been played up in the present story. When a copy of the paper was placed in her hand, she stared in astonishment.

"Why, Dad, you shouldn't have written me up like this!" she protested. "I'll be almost as notorious as Lavelle!"

"But in a slightly different way," Mr. Parker smiled. He glanced at the paper, and a smile crinkled the corners of his lips. "Say, what's this?"

"Oh, you mean that paragraph about the witch doll?" Penny asked airily. "Didn't I warn you it would finally make the front page?"

THE END



MILDRED A. WIRT MYSTERY STORIES

Large 12mo. Cloth. Illustrated. Jacket in Color.
Price 50 Cents per volume
Postage 10 cents additional

Mildred A. Wirt sounds a new and triumphant note in the field of mystery and adventure for girls with this vibrant group of stories. Told in the modern manner with a warmth and depth of feeling, and a powerful web of suspense, these stories unfold against colorful backgrounds in a panorama of excitement and mystery.

1. THE CLUE AT CROOKED LANE
2. THE HOLLOW WALL MYSTERY
3. THE SHADOW STONE
4. THE WOODEN SHOE MYSTERY
5. THROUGH THE MOON-GATE DOOR
6. GHOST GABLES
7. THE PAINTED SHIELD

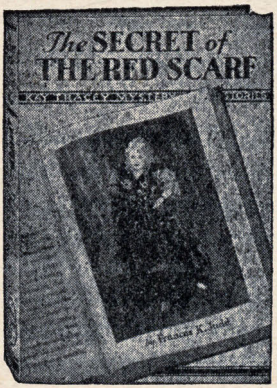
These books may be purchased wherever books are sold.

Send for Our Free Illustrated Catalogue.

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY, Publishers New York

Kay Tracey Mystery Stories

By Frances K. Judd



Large 12mo. Cloth. Illustrated Jacket in Color.
Price 50 cents per volume.
Postage 10 cents additional.

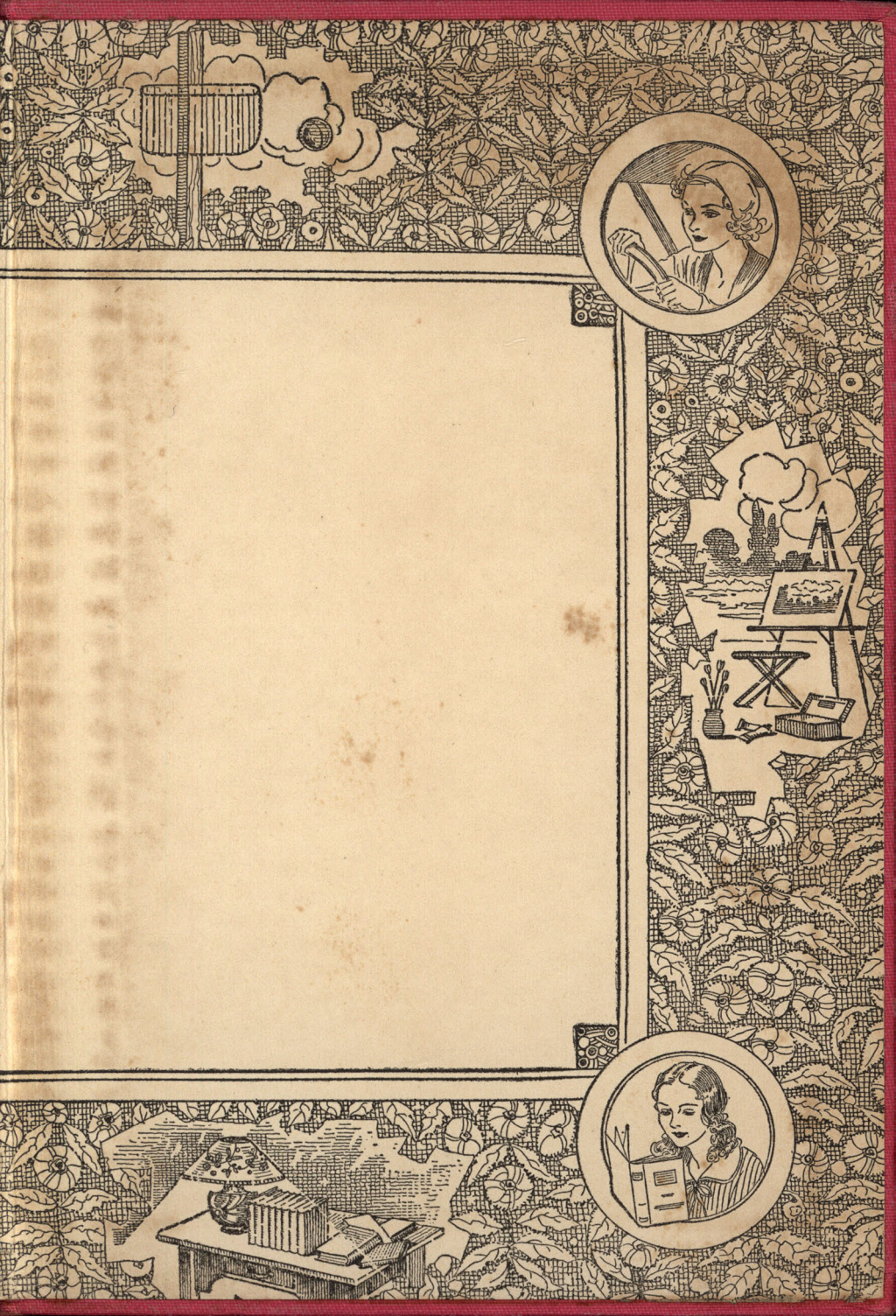
Meet clever, smiling, sixteen-year old Kay Tracey—the charming and surprising heroine whose life is one exciting thrill after another—thrills that embrace rare and baffling mysteries. By clever deduction and a persistent follow-up of clues, Kay unravels the tangled snarls of mysteries that will grip the reader from the opening page. In these stories you will find puzzling problems, strange situations, exotic objects—all rotating about a common center of mysteries that plague professional sleuths, only to be solved by this lively and lovable girl.

1. THE SECRET OF THE RED SCARF
2. THE STRANGE ECHO
3. THE MYSTERY OF THE SWAYING CURTAINS
4. THE SHADOW ON THE DOOR
5. THE SIX FINGERED GLOVE MYSTERY
6. THE GREEN CAMEO MYSTERY
7. THE SECRET AT THE WINDMILL
8. BENEATH THE CRIMSON BRIER BUSH
9. THE MESSAGE IN THE SAND DUNES
10. THE MURMURING PORTRAIT
11. WHEN THE KEY TURNED
12. IN THE SUNKEN GARDEN

These books may be purchased wherever books are sold.

Send for Our Free Illustrated Catalogue.

CUPPLES & LEON COMPANY, Publishers New York



TALE of the WITCH DOLL

WIRT

CUPPLES & LEON CO.